

Technical Writing Sample

Part I

An Analysis and Critique of the Linguistic Features of

Their Eyes Were Watching God and “Bag of Bones”

Milestone 3: ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF INFLUENCES ON USE OF LANGUAGE

3.1 CHANGES

Zora Neale Hurston used southern dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, mirroring the language she herself used in the 1930s. Although there was an old southern dialect differentiating the different areas in the 17 & 1800's, they had become merged increasingly since the Civil War. By the time this novel was set, the only distinct variations of Southern Dialect were between white and black people. It was most common for white southern Americans to use rhoticity (the pronunciations we are familiar with today in that region) and black southern Americans to use non rhoticity (pronouncing the “r” sound only before and in-between vowels). It is assumed that this dialect is left over from the non-rhotic East Anglia and London England pronunciation. (OED, 2022). Since the work is written, this is a little harder to demonstrate, but there are some excellent examples upon a deeper search. For instance, something used often, and common for this dialect is the “use of the circumfix a-...-in’ in progressive tenses, and the use of simple past infinitive vs present perfect infinitive.” (OED, 2022). Examples of this are seen in the passage under the section “**Recommendations**”. Another quick but distinctive example would be usage of the word “yonder” throughout Hurston’s novel, as this was a common word for this time period.

Stephen King, likewise, uses very casual language, though not in the form of slang so much as a lack of sophistication in his approach. As seen in the ENG 350 textbook, different classes use different language. While one might consider it harder to tell the difference between a first-class person's vocabulary and a lower class in modern America, there are certainly noticeable differences even in today's world. King, however, sticks to a blue-collar vocabulary and as mentioned in previous sections, is consistent in his approach and dialect, even when characters from the 1920's are speaking. Non-rhotic pronunciations are not only in New England English for all classes, but they still exist today. In this way, some words overlap in how they sound from one novel to the other. If it weren't for the jarring effect of Southern English at that time, one might be able to see a short sentence from each book and not know which was which in these cases.

3.2 INTENDED MESSAGE

Hurston makes a powerful message correlating slavery in the U.S. to the role of men and women in marriage. Women are confined to the wills and desires of their husbands with little to no hope of escape. The jarring nature of her chosen dialect enhances these thematic ideas because of the difference in pronunciation between classes in this time period. The more educated spoke in a more sophisticated manner, as has always been and continues to be. The limitations of Janie's speech in the novel directly lends to the correlation between proper speech protocol and ignorant speech, the precursor to the bondage of marriage. The expert transitions of elegant poetry and dialogue demonstrate an intentional usage of this language by Hurston.

As for King, there isn't a lot to break down as he uses standard English and modern dialect. The alternative pronunciation of words like "car" add to the credibility of the story and do not hinder it in any fashion.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO ALIGN WITH STANDARD LANGUAGE & LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES

Hurston's language appears in her novel in this form:

“G’wan! G’wan! You must think Ah brought yuh somethin’. When Ah ain’t brought home a thing but mahself.”

“Dat’s a gracious plenty. Yo’ friends wouldn’t want nothin’ better.”

“Ah takes dat flattery offa you, Pheoby, ‘cause Ah know it’s from de heart.”

In order to be SAE it would need to be altered to look more like this:

“*Shut* up, flattery will get you everywhere, unfortunately for you though, I brought no gifts this time around, just myself.”

“That’s more than enough, and any true friend would agree.”

“That means a lot coming from you Pheoby, because I know you mean it.”

Hurston would need to drop the southern dialect in favor for what has since become the more acceptable form of English. While we do still have southern accents and dialect, more and more the proper form of words are being taught, in other words, dropping the “g’wan” which is a merge of the words “go” and “on” and simply writing “go on!”

As for King’s work, he already uses Standard American English in his novel even in the parts written for a southern character in the 1920’s. At most to become more proper, he could replace his usage of the word “cah” with “car” to smooth out the New England influence on his words. But even then, he doesn’t use it for his characters from Maine, just has a brief side note about how those characters sound.

3.4 CONTRAST OF LANGUAGE ELEMENTS DUE TO THE DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS

Hurston's novel was published in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, which contributed to the intentional use of poor person language in her work. During the 20's and 30's African American culture took a drastic turn from the previous battle to gain space for the black people in a white person's world. Rather than stepping into the world of the formally "superior race", a large movement of people fought for the enhancement of the present black communities. This meant black people having their own systems, societies, and power that was equal to white culture, but not contingent on the idea that black people would have to adopt that culture to have access to their privileges. Hurston was exposing the consequences of uneducated speech while maintaining words and phrases that were a part of black culture, not incorrect English. (Denham, 2013).

King immerses the reader in modern New England English, sticking to all the stereotypical pronunciations in dialogue only. The novel is set in the 1990s, so most of the usage of language in his work reflects what we are still used to today. This is the period right before the internet and minicomputers as phones became huge, so we see the pre-emoji/technology age atmosphere and verbiage in "Bag of Bones". Language such as "laughing" are still present in place of acronyms like "lol". Far away from war or similar hardships that Hurston would've experienced, King's writing reflects the carefree time period of King himself. Hurston and King have a lot in common with the methods and styles they chose to utilize for their novels.

3.5 POSSIBLE ENVIRONMENTAL, HISTORICAL & CULTURAL FACTORS OF THE TIME PERIODS

Hurston was an African American female author in a time when it was rare to be so. Furthermore, she had a habit of having black female heroines, which was also unheard of at this time. As such, she was mostly ignored until after her death, when Alice Walker discovered

Hurston's unmarked grave. While her legacy is invaluable now, this was not the case at the time of the publishing of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This gave Hurston the freedom to boldly display the ugly truth of women's rights (or lack of) and compare it to slavery in the South, which she believed were similar. With nothing to lose, Hurston wrote this way consistently throughout her career, leaving an unbelievable legacy now that she is celebrated. (Hurston website, 2022).

In larger context, Hurston had lived through World War I and The Great Depression. Life was harsh for the world and not about to get any prettier heading into the second world war after the publishing of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This reality can be seen represented in the novel as Janie is constantly living the life that allows her to pursue her dream of finally finding freedom and happiness, though it's always just a little outside her reach. The realities of life, and the harshness of things being unfair to us as we live our lives, is the experience both Hurston, and her character, Janie, experience. Hurston is writing the character that has to see life for what little it could offer given the circumstances, much like the American people as a world continued to wage in war and depression.

King is from today, so it's harder to pinpoint things in our current events that impact his writing. It's fascinating that his current usage of certain dialect such as non-rhoticity, originates in a split of languages shortly before Hurston's time. It's interesting to think that the Southern dialect in Hurston's work survived and migrated to New England and remains today, including within the body of King's works. Major events that King would've lived through include the war in Vietnam, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. In his world, it was becoming more obvious that freedom is a little more fragile than Americans had always previously believed. We haven't had wars rage on our own land over and over, but it was becoming obvious that with the

development of warfare technology, that other countries would no longer have to get on our soil to wage war with our people. Even the atomic bomb required an actual aircraft unit to fly into enemy territory. With the development of missiles, and their placement on the island of Cuba, America felt fear in a brand-new way. Furthermore, with 9-11 happening shortly after the release of “Bag of Bones”, freedom would never be seen the same again. King’s character quickly learns that nothing in life is promised as he loses his wife and goes on this haunted journey in the realm of “the sins of our fathers” and how that looks in the current generation.

3.6 INFLUENCES OF THESE FACTORS ON THE LANGUAGE USAGE IN THE TWO SELECTIONS

It has become plain in the progression of research between these novels, that the English used in each selection has a common, recent, past. The two stories are just under 70 years apart, and it’s obvious that while the sound of the words in the two selections are vastly different, their syntax is not. Both novel’s sentence structure patterns are written in standard with informal language and mostly easy for the audience to decipher. Both were written for general audiences and don’t attempt to be formal in any context. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* continues to be on high school curriculum as its themes are timeless, and her writing is well done. (Hurston website, 2022).

King’s literal spelling of his words might look prettier on paper, but the sounds of the words, particularly with the letter “r”, are closer matches than one might initially assume. Notable similarities between texts include the usage of “ayuh” not because both novels present the same diphthongization, but because of their tendencies to slightly alter words into different yet recognizable forms. What looks like “uh-yah” in Hurston’s piece turns into “ayuh” in King’s.

One origin, two slightly deviated forms of “yeah”, both easy to catch in their meaning because of how closely they mirror their modern version.

This development is also seen in the historical journey from novel a to novel b. With the rise in education and the continued battle for equal education for all ethnicities and classes, language continues to improve and look similar. This is not an argument for a specific dialect or people group, rather the over all development as a society aiming to include and grow everyone. Even now in the technology age we continue to see advancements in our language such as texting and internet and emojis. People evolve, trends expand, and language is more user friendly than ever to people all over the world. Media is vast and instant, so authors, and individuals are able to have that edge for research. Arguably, this doesn't mean all language *has* to look the same, rather the author has the freedom to create whatever world and dialect they choose, and to do so accurately all with the touch of a few buttons and a search engine.

Works Cited:

Denham, Kristin. "Linguistics for Everyone" 2013. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. J.B. Lippincott, September 18, 1937.

King, Stephen. "Bag of Bones". Scribner, September 22, 1998.