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Breaking the Silence

Breaking one's own silence typically comes from the refusal to be silenced any longer.

Characters who have been silenced time and time again sometimes find themselves shouting their way to power. The journey is a difficult one because it can be incredibly complicated for a voiceless character to gain agency. *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston both contain characters that find themselves rendered quite speechless in the very early pages of each respective text. In *Our Nig*, the reader is introduced to a character named Frado who is sometimes called 'Nig.' Frado is an example of a character who discovers that in order to move from silence to empowerment, she must discover her voice.

Similarly, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* follows the travels of a character named Janie. Janie learns from each interaction she has with a man that in order to become sure in herself and her own power, she must move from silence to speech. Both of these characters exemplify the idea that by shedding one's chains of silence, then true power can be found.

Forced silence can be extremely detrimental to one's sense of identity. People are able to individualize themselves largely through their own voice. Humans require words in order to precisely define oneself. Frado in *Our Nig* and Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are both denied the ability to access the proper language required to define themselves. The absence of speech in essence destroys one's own identity. Both Frado and Jane, by discovering their voices,

begin to create an identity for themselves. This is extremely important because Frado and Jane both eventually learn to live by their own definitions of themselves.

The daughter of Mrs. Bellmont, named Mary, portrays to the reader how speech equates to power. Mary is extremely vocal about her displeasure of having Frado live in the same home as herself: “‘Send her to the Country House,’ said Mary, in reply to the query what should be done with her, in a tone which indicated self-importance in the speaker” (Wilson 15). The language of this statement is crucial to deconstruct. It is apparent that Mary is able to vocalize her wants and needs without fear of any type of retribution. Additionally, by examining the statement ‘self-importance in the speaker,’ it is clear that Mary believes what she has to say is quite relevant and important. Mary is able to have agency because she is unafraid to voice her beliefs. She is also able to voice her displeasure because she faces no threat of violence against her. It is crucial to understand that while Mary is a woman, she is also white. Her race gives her the agency to speak out against situations that displease her within her home. It is clear that Frado, because of her low status in the household, does not have the voice and agency that Mary does. These differences in agency are the main contributors to the power imbalance in the Bellmont household.

Frado enters the home of the Bellmont’s when her mother decides she will no longer be taking care of Frado. Simply put, Frado is dropped on a doorstep and never sees her family again.

Frado is a young girl when she is abandoned at the Bellmonts’, which is one factor that leads to the silencing of Frado. She has learned from a young age that, normally without reason, she is always in danger of being brutally beaten: “At first she wept aloud, which Mrs. Bellmont noticed by applying a raw-hide, always at hand in the kitchen. It was a symptom of discontent and

complaining which must be ‘nipped in the bud,’ she said” (Wilson 18). From a young age, Mrs. Bellmont had taught Frado, through force, that silence would be her safest bet during her time spent with the Bellmonts. Time and time again, Frado is beaten to reinforce the idea that to be speechless is to be safe. This concept is one that Frado holds on to during her time spent around Mrs. Bellmont, who is a particularly vicious woman. Mrs. Bellmont is aware that if she uses physical force, she will successfully subjugate Frado to the point that her fractured spirit will attend to all of Mrs. Bellmont’s demands: “...she wanted to use physical force to ‘subdue her,’ to ‘keep her down’” (Wilson 19). Mrs. Bellmont recognizes that she wields the power to beat Frado into submission. Frado is equally as aware of this fact, because she internalizes her emotions and becomes silenced.

A pivotal moment occurs in *Our Nig* when Mrs. Bellmont attempts to beat Frado with a stick. It seems that Frado has sensed that if the beatings continued with her health in such a serious state of decline, she might not survive them any longer. When Frado realizes she is about to suffer another beating, something inside her ignites and she begins to shout: “‘Stop!’ shouted Frado, ‘strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you’; and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirrings of free and independent thoughts” (Wilson 58). In this scene, Frado has reached her breaking point. The innumerable beatings that she had received from Mrs. Bellmont had become enough. It seems that the knowledge of her declining health, and the overall ignominy of Mrs. Bellmont, forced Frado to shout herself to power. Throughout the text, Frado was weak and frightened, and believed the best choice to preserve her safety was to stay small and quiet around Mrs. Bellmont. It is important to point out that not only does Frado finally reclaim her voice and shout at Mrs. Bellmont, she also throws down what

she had gathered in the ultimate act of defiance. At this point in the text, Frado realizes, with the help of Mr. Bellmont, that she has been punished unfairly too many times. Cynthia J. Davis comments on this crucial scene in "Speaking the Body's Pain: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*": "In striking contrast to women like Maria Stewart, Harriet Wilson and her Frado are "saved" not through religion but through speech itself. By speaking up, Frado in effect saves her own life, and Wilson ultimately achieves a certain immortality" (3). Davis points out the crucial element to Frado's defiant demonstration: she had saved her own life by finding her voice. This is the ultimate act of reclaiming one's own voice and power. This is a crucial moment of character development for Frado because she finally realizes the power within her: "She did not know, before, that she had a power to ward off assaults" (Wilson 58). The power Frado wields is her voice. At this point, Frado has delved into herself to unearth her source of power by accessing her voice. Jennifer Larson also points out an extremely important component of Frado's resistance in "Renovating Domesticity in *Ruth Hall*, *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Our Nig*": "She temporarily halts the violence in her domestic space and thus begins to reconstitute it on her own terms. Her active resistance through the physical and verbal rejection of forced labor contrasts starkly with the passive resistance offered by the male characters" (552-553). Larson comments on the idea that, at the end of text, Frado exerts more power and resistance than any of the men in *Our Nig*. This again shows just how much power Frado has found within herself. At the beginning of the text, Frado was severely fearful of Mrs. Bellmont. Throughout the text, Frado experiences a tremendous transformation. By the close of the text, Frado is able to halt the tyrannical power of Mrs. Bellmont because she has discovered her voice.

Another character who is forced into silence is Janie. Janie is the protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Janie is first introduced to the act of forced silence through an interaction with her grandmother, Nanny. Janie is attempting to vocalize her displeasure about being pursued by Logan Killicks, who her grandmother believes to be a good choice as a partner. When Janie verbalizes her discontent, she is met with physical force: “She slapped the girl’s face violently, and forced her eyes back so that their eyes met in a struggle” (Hurston 14). In this moment, Janie is taught that a differing opinion on a subject will be met with physical violence. Janie internalizes this notion, which results in her being less inclined to voice her displeasures without fear of retribution. Another way to critically analyze the way in which Janie moves from speechlessness to power is to examine the progression of her relationships with the men in the text. Janie’s first marriage is to a man named Logan Killicks. Much like his name, he very aggressive when he addresses Janie. Their relationship rapidly deteriorates as their bickering increases. While Janie does bicker with Killicks, she never truly finds her voice when she is with him. Killick’s attempts to keep Janie silenced by threatening her with lethal action: “Ah’ll take holt dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh! You better dry up in dere!” (Hurston 33). When Killicks tells Janie to ‘dry up,’ he is speaking directly to her willingness to talk back to him. It is clear that Killicks is threatened by Janie’s attempt to unearth her power through speech. Julie Haurykiewicz comments on Killick’s process of silencing Janie in “From mules to muliebrity: speech and silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”: “Logan, however, is actively engaged in silencing Janie, and he refuses to hear the real meaning behind her words when Janie asks what he’d do if she ‘wuz to run off and leave [him] sometime’ (29)” (54). Killick’s dismissal of Janie’s speech is another way in which he works to

silence her. The first indicator of the power and defiance that lies dormant within Janie was her decision to leave Killicks for another man. Janie skips town with a man named Joe Starks and they are married shortly after.

Janie's relationship with Joe, otherwise known as Starks, is crucial to Janie's ability to eventually harness her voice and, subsequently, her power. Janie is first entranced by the delightful and romantic promises that Starks had initially told to her: "You ain't never knowed what it was like to be treated lak a lady and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh" (Hurston 29). Janie is enamored with the idea that Starks and herself could eventually fall in love. It is interesting to consider the idea that it was Starks' sweet speech that ensnared Janie but it is her own voice and power that will cause her to leave Starks behind. The first instance of Starks' silencing of Janie occurs when the townspeople want to hear Janie make a speech. Starks quickly intervenes, making quite clear his thoughts about his wife: "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 43). It becomes apparent that because Janie is a woman, it is to be expected that she remains silenced. Various instances like this become commonplace within their marriage and eventually Janie imposes silence upon herself: "So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush" (Hurston 72). Janie has learned to silence herself because silence has become easier than dealing with Starks' violent outbursts at her speech. Janie lacks agency within her relationship with Starks because she has no way to voice her beliefs or opinions. Jody Starks lives up to his name, as he is a very blunt and aggressive man. Shawn E. Miller also comments on the use of physical and emotional violence by both Starks and Killicks to silence Janie in "Some Other Way to Try":

From Defiance to Creative Submission in Their Eyes Were Watching God”: “Starks, like Killicks, resorts to scorn whenever Janie tries to assert herself, often disparaging her looks or intelligence. The threat of violence under Killicks turns into Starks’s actual violence when he beats her for a poorly-cooked dinner (67) and for insulting his sexual prowess, when he “[strikes] Janie with all his might and [drives] her from the store” (76)” (5). Starks and Killicks both work through either verbal or physical abuse in order to keep Janie silenced. An extremely important moment occurs between Starks and Janie when she visits his sickbed. Janie chooses to visit him because she will be able to explain the many injustices that Starks has committed. As Janie airs her grievances against Starks, his health quickly deteriorates. In a sense, Janie talks Starks to death: “Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo’ you die” (Hurston 86). This scene is extremely important because Janie has seized power through her speech. She demands that Starks listen to what she has to say. He is unable to keep her silenced as his health continues to decline. Eventually Starks dies and Janie rises another rung on the ladder to her full power. As Janie moves through each relationship, she gradually discovers the power that lies within herself as she moves from silenced to speech.

Janie’s final relationship with Teacake marks her true liberation. Janie truly falls in love with Teacake because she finally finds the emotionally connection she for so long sought after. Janie feels such a deep affection for Teacake because he treats her as an equal. The equal power of balance helps Janie gain the confidence she needs in order to move from silenced to speech. Additionally, Teacake helps Janie on her path to liberation because he enables her growth: “He done taught me de maiden language all over” (Hurston 115). This is extremely important because it marks a serious transition from the beginning of the text to the present scene. Initially,

Janie had been with men that wanted to keep her small and silenced. Teacake breaks this tradition because he wants to help Janie grow and develop. The final transformation that enables the reader to clearly see Janie's transformation is the notion that Janie has become a storyteller. Janie has recounted her tale from silenced to speech to her friend, Pheoby. It is very symbolic that Janie is able to tell her own tale, without any pressures or interferences from any outside forces. It is clear that Janie has become empowered because her storytelling directly affects Pheoby: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin; tuh you, Janie. Ah aint' satisfied wid mahself no mo'" (Hurston 192). Janie now radiates a sense of power and confidence that when it is cast upon others, they feel the desire to elevate themselves as well. Through the power of speech, Janie has freed herself from the chains of silence that for so long had weighed her down.

Speech is an integral part of one's own source of power. Being able to assert oneself and demand better treatment is a theme that weaves itself through *Our Nig* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie and Frado both undertook the journey from silenced to speech in their respective texts. Both of these characters, by the act of lifting the silences placed upon them, harnessed a power that they found within themselves. With the use of this power, both characters were able to fight off their oppressors and change the quality of their lives.

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