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Women's Suffrage Rhetorical Analysis

The evolution of Women's rights in America was a lengthy and tedious one. Beginning with republican motherhood, or the education of white mothers in order to teach their children, the social and political rights of women have increased steadily, albeit glacially, since the 1800s (Imbornoni). This is thanks to the activism of a diverse and innumerable group of feminists. Among them were Isabella Baumfree, and Samuel Clemens, two radically varied individuals. Despite these differences, many dictive commonalities can be seen throughout their most famous speeches on women's rights. The parallels in Baumfree's and Clemens's speeches are many, as both speakers use rhetoric to strengthen their respective arguments.

Isabella Baumfree was born as a slave in 1797. In 1808, she was sold and separated from her family ("A Life and Legacy of Faith."). Her master promised her release if she "would do well and be faithful", but soon changed his mind (PBS). Isabella Baufree escaped captivity in 1826 with her infant daughter (PBS). She found refuge with the Van Wagenen family, who soon converted her to Methodism ("A Life and Legacy of Faith."). She became a devout Christian, despite the lacking the ability to read the bible ("A Life and Legacy of Faith."). After this transformation, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth and devoted her life to preaching Christianity and abolition at various conventions led by George Thompson (PBS). It was in one these conventions in 1851 when she would give her most famous speech: "Ain't I A Woman?".

The Ohio Women's Rights Convention was attended by many "first-wave" feminists, but rare was a black woman, and rarer still one with such ardor ("A Life and Legacy of Faith."). In a convention focused on rights of women who'd previously been pampered, Truth spoke from the perspective of the persecuted. Truth's speech used a unique diction to match her life's story; she lived without the opportunity to become properly educated: English wasn't even her first language. Regardless, she crafted an argument "impossible to transfer to paper" (Truth). "That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him" (Truth). In conjunction with biblical allusion and rhetorical question, these pathos contribute significantly to the effective portrayal of Truth's argument. In addition, Truth uses ethos and parallelism when expressing her outrage in the mistreatment of African American women; "That man over there says 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 arn't [*sic*] I a woman?" (Truth). The use of logos in Truth's argument appears when she claims "I could work as much" as a man, as she implies that one that works as much as another deserves the same rights (Truth). The brilliance in Truth's diction has nothing to do with poise or careful language, but passion: something vital to the success of the American rights movements. This extemporaneous speech changed the mood of the convention and movement entirely (Iboroni).

Samuel Clemens was born in Missouri in 1835 as the sixth of seven children ("A Life Lived in a Rapidly Changing World"). Throughout Clemens' childhood, he was exposed to a slave based economy. This made an impression vital to his later works. He was fascinated with

riverboats, and so he changed his name to “mark twain”, a phrase used to describe 12 feet of depth ("A Life Lived in a Rapidly Changing World"). He travelled internationally in his young adulthood, logging his journey along the way. These logs became critically acclaimed and began his success as a writer ("A Life Lived in a Rapidly Changing World"). He became a highly demanded speaker in the United States. One feminist speech in particular is remembered: “Votes For Women”.

In a time in which a woman in a technical field was considered a rarity, The Hebrew Technical School for Girls provided free education for young women seeking career in commercial and industrial sectors. During one of their annual meetings, Mark Twain spoke as a guest.

> I have always believed, long before my mother died, that, with her gray hairs and admirable intellect, perhaps she knew as much as I did. Perhaps she knew as much about voting as I… I should like to see the time come when women shall help to make the laws. I should like to see that whiplash, the ballot, in the hands of women. As for this city's government, I don't want to say much, except that it is a shame -- a shame; but if I should live twenty-five years longer -- and there is no reason why I shouldn't -- I think I'll see women handle the ballot. If women had the ballot to-day, the state of things in this town would not exist.

Twain’s speech followed a tone parallel to the one used in his writings: educated, yet relatable. Twain portrays mastery in rhetorical devices such as metaphor and amplification, as well as pathos specifically directed towards his audience. The ethos portrayal of his mother along with understatement and parallelism strengthen Twain’s argument. Additionally, Twain

references the poor conditions in the area at that time, suggesting that had Women's Suffrage existed, "the state of things in this town would not exist" (Twain).

Both Twain and Truth successfully used rhetorical devices to cater to their specific audiences: an educated yet relatable one for a school gathering, and a passionate and spontaneous one for an unrepresentative rights convention. Both speakers changed their legal names, travelled extensively, and became well known for their activism. It is because of speakers like Twain and Truth that in 1920, women were granted the right to vote in the United States after the passage of the 19th amendment.

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