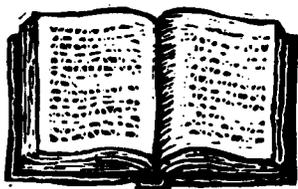


Their Eyes Were Watching God

Zora Neale Hurston

1937

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* first appeared in 1937, it was well-received by white critics as an intimate portrait of southern blacks, but African-American reviewers rejected the novel as pandering to white audiences and perpetuating stereotypes of blacks as happy-go-lucky and ignorant. Unfortunately, the novel and its author, Zora Neale Hurston, were quickly forgotten. But within the last twenty years it has received renewed attention from scholars who praise its unique contribution to African-American literature, and it has become one of the newest and most original works to consistently appear in college courses across the country and to be included in updated versions of the American literary canon. The book has been admired by African-Americanists for its celebration of black culture and dialect and by feminists for its depiction of a woman's progress towards self-awareness and fulfillment. But the novel continues to receive criticism for what some see as its lack of engagement with racial prejudice and its ambivalent treatment of relations between the sexes. No one disputes, though, its impressive use of metaphor, dialect, and folklore of southern rural blacks, which Hurston studied as an anthropologist, to reflect the rich cultural heritage of African Americans.



Author Biography

Zora Neale Hurston's colorful life was a strange mixture of acclaim and censure, success

and poverty, pride and shame. But her varied life, insatiable curiosity, and profound wit made her one of the most fascinating writers America has known. Even her date of birth remains a mystery. She claimed in her autobiography to have been born on 7 January 1903, but family members swore she was born anywhere from 1891 to 1902. Nevertheless, it is known that she was born in Eatonville, Florida, which was to become the setting for most of her fiction and was the first all-black incorporated town in the nation. Growing up there, where her father was mayor, Hurston was largely sheltered from the racial prejudice African Americans experienced elsewhere in America.

At the age of fourteen, Hurston struck out on her own, working as a maid for white families, and was sent to Morgan Academy in Baltimore by one of her employers. Her educational opportunities continued to grow. She studied at Barnard College, where she worked under the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas. She also attended Howard University, and Columbia University, where she began work towards a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Hurston published her first story in 1921 and quickly gained recognition among the writers of the newly formed Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of artistic innovation in the African-American community of Harlem. She moved there in 1925 with little money but much ambition, and became well-known as the most colorful member of the artistic and literary circles of the city. She also gained the attention of Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron who agreed to fund Hurston's trips to Florida where she gathered folklore. Although she married Herbert Sheen during this period, they lived together only eight months before her career came between them. While they split amicably, a later marriage to Albert Price III, which lasted from 1939 to 1943, ended bitterly.

Hurston's career as a novelist picked up in the 1930s. Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, appeared in 1934 and became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The following year, she published *Mules and Men*, a collection of folktales that mixed anthropology and fiction. This book gained her widespread recognition and helped her win a Guggenheim fellowship to study folklore in the West Indies. Before leaving for Haiti, she fell in love with a younger man. When he demanded that she give up her career, she ended the affair, but wrote the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks, translating their romance into the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake. The novel appeared in 1937 to some recognition and contro-



Zora Neale Hurston

versy, but it quickly receded from the limelight and was not a commercial success.

Although she published two more novels, another book of folklore, and dozens of stories, Hurston's literary reputation dwindled throughout the 1940s and '50s. In 1948 she was charged with committing an immoral act with a ten-year-old boy and was later absolved of the crime, but the damage to her public reputation had been done. Hurston felt that she was forever outcast from the African-American literary community of Harlem, so she spent the rest of her life in Florida, where she worked various jobs and tried to keep her head above water financially. When she suffered a stroke in 1959, she was committed to a welfare home where she died penniless and alone in 1960. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the segregated cemetery of Fort Pierce. The location remained unknown until 1973, when it was located by author Alice Walker.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* opens with a lyrical passage in which Janie Starks returns to her previous home, Eatonville.

The other townspeople observe her in judgment and speculate about what has brought her back. Through their dialogue, the characters of Pheoby, Janie's best friend, and Tea Cake, the young man she left with, are introduced. Eventually, Pheoby visits Janie, who tells her that Tea Cake is "gone." The rest of the novel will consist of the story Janie tells Pheoby about what has happened to her.

Chapters 2 through 4

Janie summarizes her childhood, when she lived with her maternal grandmother, Nanny, who also cared for several white children. At one point, a photographer takes a picture of all of the children. While examining the photograph, Janie realizes that she is black; until then she had thought she was like all of the white children. One spring afternoon years later, Janie is daydreaming under a pear tree when Johnny Taylor appears and kisses her. Nanny observes this and decides that Janie ought to get married soon. She has decided on Brother Logan Killicks as Janie's future husband; he is apparently a responsible man, but Janie does not find him attractive and cannot imagine loving him. But Janie and Logan are married, and shortly thereafter Nanny dies.

Sometime later, Logan decides that Janie should perform more manual labor and leaves to buy a mule so that Janie can help him with the plowing. While he is gone, another man appears, a stranger to the area who identifies himself as Joe Starks. He is on his way to a town populated entirely by black people, where he has large ambitions for himself. Although Joe invites Janie to accompany him, she hesitates because she imagines how her grandmother would disapprove. When Janie threatens to leave Logan, he scorns her background. The next morning she meets Joe Starks, and they travel to Green Cove Springs where they are married.

Chapters 5 through 9

Joe and Janie arrive in Eatonville, where Joe immediately asks to speak to the mayor and is informed that the town does not have one. Impressing the others, Joe pays cash for two hundred acres of land and begins advertising for additional people to move to Eatonville. After opening a store, Joe is soon appointed Mayor, but discord comes when he prevents Janie from making a speech some of the men have requested. Joe and Janie begin to grow apart emotionally.

Many of the men enjoy sitting on the store's porch and telling exaggerated stories. Although

Janie longs to join in, Joe believes such activities and company are too low-class for her. Another man, Matt Bonner, owns a mule that he is working nearly to death. When Janie expresses dismay over the abuse of this mule, Joe forces Matt to sell the mule for five dollars. After the mule dies, Joe again forbids Janie to participate in the mock funeral with the rest of the town.

The tension between Joe and Janie continues to intensify, until one day Joe slaps her because his supper has been poorly cooked. Janie's image of Joe is destroyed at this moment, and although she appears to continue to be obedient, she begins separating her inner and outer lives. Then one day when Janie fails to cut a plug of tobacco properly, Joe humiliates her in front of the others, commenting on aspects of her body. This time Janie replies, ridiculing Joe for his own lack of masculinity in front of the other men. Joe is so angry that he can respond only by hitting her.

Joe subsequently becomes ill and believes Janie has cast a spell on him. Janie sends for a doctor, who reveals that Joe's condition is fatal. Although Janie attempts to have a final conversation with him, Joe refuses to listen and dies fighting death. His funeral is large and formal.

Chapters 10 through 13

After several months, another stranger appears. His name is Vergible Woods, but his nickname is Tea Cake. He teaches Janie to play checkers, and for the first time she feels that someone is truly treating her as an individual. They do many unconventional activities together, such as fishing at midnight, and Janie begins to fall in love with him. She hesitates to trust him, though, because she is several years older than he is and because, as Joe's heir, she is a comparatively wealthy woman. Janie decides to sell the store so that she can begin a new life with Tea Cake. He sends for her from Jacksonville, and she leaves on an early morning train. They get married immediately.

Janie has hidden two hundred dollars in a purse inside her clothes, but when she wakes up the next morning, Tea Cake is gone and so is the money. After another day, he returns with only twelve dollars; he had thrown a party but promises to win the money back gambling. When he does, Janie decides to trust him and tells him about additional money she has saved. Tea Cake suggests that they go down to the Everglades to work.

Chapters 14 through 17

Tea Cake teaches Janie to shoot, and she becomes quite skilled. Working in the Everglades is fun for both of them; they throw parties, and Janie participates in the playful atmosphere. Janie becomes jealous of another woman who is flirting with Tea Cake, but he assures Janie that she has nothing to worry about. They decide to stay in the Everglades during the off season. Another woman, Mrs. Turner, cultivates a friendship with Janie, hoping that she will leave Tea Cake and marry Mrs. Turner's brother. Mrs. Turner feels disdainful of other black people, especially if their complexion is particularly dark. At this point, Tea Cake becomes jealous and beats Janie in order to demonstrate to the Turners that he is boss in his household.

Chapters 18 through 20

A hurricane threatens the Everglades, and many of the residents leave, but Janie and Tea Cake decide to ride the storm out. When the storm becomes fierce, they sit in their cabin, appearing "to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." When the hurricane threatens to flood their house, they leave, attempting to walk toward Palm Beach. When Janie is nearly attacked by a dog, Tea Cake rescues her, but he is bitten. The wound appears superficial and begins to heal.

The dog stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. The dog raced down the back-bone of the cow to the attack and Janie screamed and slipped far back on the tail of the cow, just out of reach of the dog's angry jaws. He wanted to plunge in after her but dreaded the water, somehow. Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow's rump and seized the dog by the neck. But he was a powerful dog and Tea Cake was overtired. So he didn't kill the dog with one stroke as he had intended. But the dog couldn't free himself either. They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone once. Then Tea Cake finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there. The cow relieved of a great weight was landing on the fill with Janie before Tea Cake stroked in and crawled weakly upon the fill again.

After the hurricane, black men are forced to act as grave diggers, but they must be careful to separate the white corpses from the black ones, because the white bodies will be placed in coffins while the black ones will be buried in a mass grave. After one day, Tea Cake decides they should return to the Everglades.

Three weeks later, Tea Cake falls ill. He has a headache and is unable to eat or drink. The doctor reveals that he has rabies and will likely die. He is concerned that Tea Cake will attack Janie and perhaps bite her also. Janie realizes that Tea Cake is becoming insane as his illness progresses. He eventually tries to shoot Janie, who shoots and kills him.

Janie must be tried for murder, but she is acquitted; the jury finds that she acted in self-defense. Janie provides an elaborate funeral for Tea Cake in Palm Beach. The novel concludes with a return to the conversation between Janie and Pheoby after Janie has returned to the house she lived in with Joe.

Characters

Janie Crawford

The heroine of the novel, Janie, is the first black woman character in African-American fiction to embark on a journey of self-discovery and achieve independence and self-understanding. But she does not do so until she is nearly forty years old. Many obstacles stand in her way, the first of which is her grandmother, who encourages her to marry Logan Killicks for material security. But Janie discovers that "marriage did not make love," and she decides to leave him. When Joe Starks enters her life, she believes she has found her ticket to the "horizon," so she marries him. But when they arrive in Eatonville, she discovers that she is going to be nothing but an ornament of his power and success. Stifled by Jody and cut off from the rest of the community by her status as the mayor's wife, she learns to hide her real self and wear a mask for Jody and the town that conforms to their expectations for her. But in the process she loses sight of the real self she has buried. The narrator tells us, "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew not how to mix them." After twenty years of marriage, an enmity has grown between Janie and her husband that results in her finally speaking up for herself. She tells him, in essence, that he is no longer a real man, and her outburst robs him of the will to live. As he lays on his deathbed, she sums up for him what their marriage has been like for her: "Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me."

Having lost herself once, she vows not to do so again, and so she enjoys her freedom after his death. But when Tea Cake walks into her life, she finds a man who complements her search for self-

Media Adaptations



- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been recorded on cassette in an abridged version by Caedmon. This recording, which came out in 1991, was performed by Ruby Dee.
 - In 1994, Recorded Books produced an unabridged recording of the novel on sound cassette, read by Michele-Denise Woods.
 - The movie rights to the novel are owned by Quincy Jones and Oprah Winfrey, although as of 1997 no film had yet been made.
-

awareness rather than squelches it. Under the influence of his all-encompassing love, “her soul crawled out from its hiding place.” With Tea Cake, she finds a spiritual sense of love that had been absent in her first two marriages. “Ah wuz fumbli’ round and God opened the door,” she tells him. But many critics have questioned Hurston’s decision to make Janie discover her true self in the context of a relationship with a man. What has seemed like a feminist search for identity is undermined by Janie’s apparent dependence on Tea Cake, some say. But Janie does eventually gain true independence when she is forced to kill Tea Cake, who has gone mad from being bitten by a rabid dog and has come after her with a gun. This final act, although it devastates Janie, also allows her to return home to Eatonville a fully self-sufficient woman who is finally at peace with herself. “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons,” she tells her friend Pheoby. Her journey of self-discovery is complete.

Hezekiah

After Jody’s death, Hezekiah replaces him as the store’s manager. Janie notices that Hezekiah also begins to take on many of Jody’s characteristics.

Jody

See Joe Starks

Janie Killicks

See Janie Crawford

Logan Killicks

Janie’s first husband. Her grandmother has encouraged her to marry him because he can give her a house and sixty acres of farmland, hence security. His ugly appearance and body odor prevent Janie from falling in love with him. When he tells her he is going to buy a mule for her to plow with, Janie decides that life with Logan is not what she bargained for. She leaves him when the more dashing Joe Starks comes along.

Motor Boat

A gambling friend of Tea Cake down on the muck. When the hurricane hits, Motor Boat flees with Janie and Tea Cake.

Nanny

Janie’s grandmother, who raises her in the absence of her mother. A former slave who was raped by her master, Nanny teaches Janie that the “nigger woman is de mule uh de world.” In her hopes that Janie will have a better life, she encourages her to marry Logan Killicks, a man who will offer her “protection.” But not long after Janie marries him, Nanny dies. Later in life, after Jody has died, Janie reassesses the advice Nanny had given her. “Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon ... and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her.” Janie decides that she hates Nanny for teaching her to bury her own desires for the sake of security.

Nunkie

Young woman on the muck who attempts to lead Tea Cake away from Janie.

Sop-de-Bottom

A friend of Tea Cake on the muck. He applauds Tea Cake’s beating of Janie and attempts to speak up at Janie’s trial after she has killed Tea Cake. He wants to accuse Janie of murder but is silenced by a white lawyer.

Janie Starks

See Janie Crawford

Joe Starks

Jody rescues Janie from her first marriage, whisking her off to Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town where he intends to “be a big voice,” some-

thing he has been denied in other towns where whites are in control. Although Janie is reluctant to go, Jody “spoke for far horizon,” offering Janie a chance for adventure. But shortly after they arrive in Eatonville, Janie finds out that her life with Jody will be anything but exciting. When he becomes mayor and the most respectable citizen in town, she becomes a “pretty doll-baby,” as he calls her, a token of his stature in the town. Jody defines himself by his position and possessions, the most valuable of which is Janie. So Jody stifles Janie’s development as he silences her and keeps her from participating in the town’s talk on the porch of their store. Jody’s world becomes a kind of prison for Janie, who is isolated on a pedestal of bourgeois ideals. As Jody grows older and takes his fears of aging out on Janie, she realizes that her “image” of him has “tumbled down and shattered.” When he ridicules her aging body in front of others at the store, something breaks in Janie, and she tells him, “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.” By belittling his manhood in front of the town, Janie figuratively kills him, as he begins a slow deterioration and dies of kidney failure. Janie attempts to come to terms with Jody on his death bed, and she tells him, “All dis bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice—dat ain’t whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you.” But she comes to the conclusion that the only kind of change he was able to create in her life was an outward change in material conditions. Nothing has changed inside of him, and she has not been able to grow at all. When he dies, the only legacy he leaves Janie is his money. At the end of the book, it is the memories of Tea Cake that inhabit the house, not those of Jody.

Johnny Taylor

The boy who kisses Janie over the fence. This event signals Janie’s sexual awakening and instigates Nanny’s concerns that Janie will allow an unworthy man to lure her away.

Mr. Turner

Restaurant owner on the muck who has no control over his wife.

Mrs. Turner

A light-skinned mulatto woman who befriends Janie on the muck. Her prejudices against those who are blacker than herself reveal the racism within the black community. Her restaurant, which she owns with her husband, is destroyed by Tea

Cake and his friends, who resent her racist attitudes towards them.

Mrs. Annie Tyler

A woman from Eatonville who ran off with a younger man who was after her money. Her shameful return to the town after he has left her is a warning to Janie, who fears that Tea Cake will do the same to her.

Pheoby Watson

Janie’s “bosom friend” who is her link to the Eatonville community. Pheoby’s role in the book is an important one, as she is the audience for Janie’s life story, which is the novel. After hearing the whole story, Pheoby tells her, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you.” Many critics see this statement as the feminist declaration that Janie’s story will inspire other women to demand self-fulfillment.

Janie Woods

See Janie Crawford

Tea Cake Woods

See Vergible Woods

Vergible Woods

When Tea Cake, a young man of twenty-five, enters Janie's life, he changes it forever. He does not possess the outward manifestations of power, namely wealth and position, that Jody did. Instead, he possesses an inner power that comes with self-knowledge and being comfortable with himself. When Janie marries Tea Cake, they move to Jacksonville, and she is initiated into his world. At first he is afraid she will not want to be a part of his community. "You ain't usetuh folks lak dat," he tells her. But she assures him that she "aims tuh partake wid everything." When they move to the muck, then, to live amongst the migrant agricultural workers picking beans, Janie and Tea Cake's house becomes the center of the community, hosting dances and card games. Most importantly, Tea Cake allows Janie to feel like she belongs to this community in a way that Jody never let her belong to the Eatonville community. In fact, Tea Cake inspires two important developments in Janie's growth by encouraging her to accept herself and to feel at home in the black community. The space he creates for her that makes these two things possible is a loving relationship that satisfies Janie's spiritual needs, rather than focusing on the material wants that had defined her two previous marriages.

Their relationship is more equal as Tea Cake teaches her how to play checkers, hunt, and fish, activities from which Jody had excluded her because of her gender. Tea Cake almost becomes an idealized male figure in the book as he provides all of the support and love that has been lacking in Janie's life. However, he also falls back on attitudes of male dominance in his relationship with Janie. Many critics have seen his beating of Janie as an indication that Hurston believed all men possessed the need to overpower women and be the "boss." But Tea Cake is a part of Janie's life for only two years. As they try to escape the devastation of a hurricane in the Everglades, Tea Cake rescues Janie from a rabid dog, only to be bitten himself. By the time they discover Tea Cake's illness, it is too late. When he tries to kill Janie in his madness, she is forced to shoot him to protect herself.

Themes

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* charts the development of an African-

American woman living in the 1920s and 1930s as she searches for her true identity.

Search for Self

Although the novel follows Janie through three relationships with men, most critics see its main theme to be Janie's search for herself. She must fight off the influences of her grandmother, who encourages her to sacrifice self-fulfillment for security, and her first two husbands, who stifle her development. Her second husband, Jody, has an especially negative impact on Janie's growth as his bourgeois aspirations turn her into a symbol of his stature in the town. She is not allowed to be herself, but must conform to his notions of propriety, which means she cannot enjoy the talk of the townfolk on the porch, let alone participate in it. After he is elected mayor, she is asked to give "a few words uh encouragement," but Jody interrupts the applause by telling the town, "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for her nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." After this, Janie feels "cold," realizing that by cutting her off, Jody has prevented her from deciding for herself whether or not she even wanted to give a speech. Throughout the rest of her marriage, Janie must bury her own desires to the point where she loses sight of them altogether. But after Jody's death she feels a freedom she has never known.

When the young Tea Cake enters her life, she decides that she has done what Jody and the town have wanted her to do long enough, so she rejects their ideas for her future and marries a younger man. Her relationship with Tea Cake allows her to find herself in a way that had not been possible before. But some critics see Tea Cake as another obstacle to Janie's development. In some ways, their relationship is conventional in the sense that Janie willingly defers to his judgment and follows him on his adventures. "Once upon uh time, Ah never 'spected nothin', Tea Cake, but being' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh," she tells him. "But you come 'long and made somethin' out me." Statements like this have caused critics to question how successful Janie is at discovering her true self. Some see the ending as a reaffirmation that a woman must find herself on her own. By killing Tea Cake in self-defense, although she deeply regrets having to do so, Janie has come full circle in her development. She now knows who she is and has found "peace." In the closing lines the narrator tells us, "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net," indicating that she no longer has to seek

for meaning outside of herself in the world; she has found it within herself.

Language and Meaning

Integral to Janie's search for self is her quest to become a speaking subject. Language is depicted in the novel as the means by which one becomes a full-fledged member of the community and, hence, a full human being. In Eatonville, the men engage in "eternal arguments, ... a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason." These contests in language are the central activities in the town, but only the men are allowed to participate. Janie especially regrets being excluded, but "gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush." But the dam of repressed language erupts when Jody ridicules her aging body in front of the men in the store. Her speech then becomes a weapon as she tells him (and everyone else), "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." By comparing him to a woman going through menopause, she attacks his manhood in an irretrievable way. Janie has gained her voice, and in the process has metaphorically killed her husband, whose strength has resided in her silence and submission. Later, when Janie and Tea Cake are on the muck, Janie becomes a full member of the community, as signified by her ability as a speaking subject. "The men held big arguments here like they used to on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest." At the end of the book, Janie's return to tell her story to the town, through Pheoby, signals to some critics her reintegration in the community. Others, though, believe she is still excluded because she will not speak to them directly.

Race and Racism

Although there is very little discussion of relations between whites and blacks in the novel, racism and class differences are shown to have infected the African-American community. The supposed biological and cultural superiority of whiteness hovers over the lives of all the black characters in the book, as Janie witnesses the moral bankruptcy of those who value whiteness over their own black selves. Joe Starks is on his way to Eatonville when Janie meets him, because he is tired of being subservient to whites. He intends in an all-black town to have power over others, a kind of power that is modeled on that of white men. He possesses a "bow-down command in his face," and his large

Topics for Further Study



- Research the conditions under which southern blacks lived during the Great Depression and compare to the plight of migrant workers on the muck in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Research the feminist movement from the early twentieth century to today. Based on your understanding of what a feminist was then and is now, argue whether Janie can or should be considered a feminist by contemporary scholars.
- Study the relationships between wealthy white patrons and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and argue whether *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is meant to appeal to white readers of the time or is directed only at black readers.
- Study the historic debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois and, based on your reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, create a response based on how you think Zora Neale Hurston would have responded to the fundamental issues of racial progress and race relations.

white house impresses the town because it makes the rest of the houses in town resemble "servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house,'" reflecting the housing arrangements of plantations during slavery. He also buys a desk like those owned by prominent white men in the neighboring town of Maitland and adopts behaviors which mimic the habits of middle-class whites. For Jody, success is measured by standards adopted from the white community, and as a result, he looks down on the townfolk as "common" and even as his inferiors. One of the men comments, "You kin feel a switch in his hand when he's talking to yuh." Janie's rejection of Jody's feelings of superiority and his emphasis on attaining bourgeois respectability have led many critics to see the novel as a critique of middle-class blacks who had gained some prestige in the 1920s but had also lost their connection with the roots of the black community, the folk.

This critique becomes more explicit in Janie and Tea Cake's dismissal of Mrs. Turner's feelings of superiority over dark-skinned blacks. As a fair-skinned and financially well-off mulatto, Mrs. Turner desires to separate herself and Janie, who is also mulatto, from the "black folks." She tells Janie, "We oughta lighten up de race," and "Us oughta class off." But Janie responds, "Us can't *do* it. We'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks." For Janie, there are no divisions in the black community. She has moved easily from her high-class position in Eatonville to her life amongst the folk with Tea Cake, and together they have welcomed the black workers from the Bahamas, who had previously been ostracized from the African-Americans on the muck. In addition, Mrs. Turner's racist ideas are ridiculed by the narrator, who writes, "Behind her crude words was a belief that somehow she and others through worship could attain her paradise—a heaven of straight-haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs. The physical impossibilities in no way injured faith." Racism and division within the African-American community are finally revealed as not only ridiculous but as tragic, as a woman like Mrs. Turner is consumed by self-hatred, the inherent by-product of her disdain of blackness. Only through a loving acceptance of all things black can one become a full, healthy human being, as Janie learns.

Style

Narration

Although the framing device of Janie telling Pheoby her story sets up the novel as Janie's story, it is not told in the first person. Instead, a narrative voice tells most of the story, and there has been much discussion of whose voice this is. Claire Crabtree, writing in *Southern Literary Journal*, argues that it is "always close to but not identical with Janie's consciousness," indicating that the omniscient narrator, who knows more about other characters' thoughts than Janie could know herself, is also closely aligned with the heroine. The narrator also uses free indirect speech at many points to convey Janie's thoughts, another indication that the narrator and Janie's consciousness are closely aligned. But Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *The Signifying Monkey*, argues that the narrative voice "echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once col-

lective and compelling." The narrator, then, who speaks in standard English, while the characters speak in black dialect, becomes, according to Gates, more and more representative of the black community as it progressively adopts the patterns of black vernacular speech. The narrative voice takes on the aspect of oral speech, telling not only Janie's story, but many other stories as well. For example, Nanny's voice takes over as she tells the story of Janie's heritage, and the voices on the porch also take over for long stretches as their "arguments" tell the story of life in Eatonville. In essence, there are many storytellers within the larger story of Janie's life, and many voices inform the novel.

Folklore

One of the most unique features of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is its integration of folklore with fiction. Hurston borrows literary devices from the black rural oral tradition, which she studied as an anthropologist, to further cement her privileging of that tradition over the Western literary tradition. For example, she borrows the technique of repetition in threes found commonly in folklore in her depiction of Janie's three marriages. Also, in the words of Claire Crabtree, "Janie follows a pattern familiar to folklorists of a young person's journey from home to face adventure and various dangers, followed by a triumphant homecoming." In addition, Janie returns "richer and wiser" than she left, and she is ready to share her story with Pheoby, intending that the story be repeated, as a kind of folktale to be passed on.

Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, which experienced its heyday in Harlem in the 1920s but also flourished well into the 1930s, was an outpouring of creative innovation among blacks that celebrated the achievements of black intellectuals and artists. The initial goal of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance was to overcome racism and convince the white public that African-Americans were more intelligent than the stereotypes of docile, ignorant blacks that pervaded the popular arena. In order to do so, then, most of the early writers associated with the movement imitated the themes and styles of mainstream, white literature. But later writers felt that African-American literature should depict the unique and debilitating circumstances in which blacks lived, confronting their white audiences with scenes of brutal racism. Zora Neale Hurston, considered the most important female member of the Harlem Renaissance, felt that the writings of



*Harlem, 1927, the center of the African-American artistic and intellectual movement in the 1920s and '30s where Zora Neale Hurston wrote her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.*

African-Americans should celebrate the speech and traditions of black people. The use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* caused much controversy among other black writers of the day when it was first published because many felt that such language in the mouths of black characters perpetuated negative stereotypes about blacks as ignorant, but critics today agree that the novel's celebration of black language was the most important contribution Hurston made to African-American literature.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

For southern farmers, both black and white, who did not enjoy the prosperity of northern industrial centers, the Great Depression had begun in the 1920s, well before the stock market crash of 1929. Factors such as soil erosion, the attack of the boll weevil on cotton crops, and the increasing competition from foreign markets led to widespread poverty amongst southern farmers. The majority of African Americans were still farming in the South and they were much harder hit than the

white population, even after the advent of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The numbers of blacks on relief were three to four times higher than the number of whites, but relief organizations discriminated by race; some would not help blacks altogether, while others gave lower amounts of aid to blacks than they did to whites. Such practices led one NAACP leader to call the program "the same raw deal." Many critics have criticized *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for ignoring the plight of African-American farmers in the South during the 1920s and 30s, although Hurston does briefly describe the downtrodden migrant workers who come to pick beans on the muck. "Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor."

The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance

A large number of African Americans fought in the First World War under the banner of freedom, only to return home to find how far they were from such a goal. By 1920, over one million blacks had fled the South, where they had little chance of

Compare & Contrast

- **1920s and '30s:** The numbers of unemployed African Americans during the Great Depression was as much as 25% in northern cities, and well over 50% in many southern cities, figures that were three to four times higher than the number of unemployed whites.

Today: Unemployment among African-Americans averages between 10 and 11%, higher than the 4.5 to 5% among whites.

- **1920s and '30s:** Blues and jazz flourished from New Orleans to Harlem. Although these indigenous American music forms were the dominant mode of expression for the oppressed black culture, they also attracted a large audience of whites.

Today: Rap and hip-hop are the major musical forms that express the unique experiences of black culture in America's ghettos, but they also have many non-black fans, not only in America, but all over the world.

- **1920s and '30s:** In the South, Jim Crow laws dictated that blacks and whites use separate drinking fountains, eat in separate restaurants, and learn in separate schools. In the North, al-

though such laws did not exist, blacks were more subtly excluded from better jobs, schools, and neighborhoods, creating black ghettos in the major cities.

Today: Affirmative action plans to end discrimination in hiring have been in place for fifteen years. Some people are now calling for their abolishment, claiming the goal has been achieved, while others believe there is still a long way to go.

- **1920s and '30s:** Although many women writers participated in the Harlem Renaissance, they experienced the prejudice of their male counterparts, who excluded all but a chosen few of them from the anthologies and prestigious periodicals.

Today: African-American women writers are experiencing their own "Renaissance," as represented by Toni Morrison's receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Most contemporary critics agree that some of the most important literature being produced today is by African-American women, many of whom claim a direct heritage from Zora Neale Hurston.

rising out of poverty, and migrated to the industrial centers of the North where they obtained jobs in factories and packing houses, eventually making up as much as twenty percent of the industrial work force there. The migration of blacks to northern cities caused whites to fear that their jobs would be threatened, and increased racial tensions erupted in race riots in 1917. Nonetheless, many blacks began to vocally demand an end to discrimination. Out of this climate came calls for a "New Negro," who would be filled with racial pride and demand justice for his people. While earlier black leaders, represented by Booker T. Washington, had accepted segregation and preached cooperation and patience, new black leaders like W. E. B. DuBois insisted that concessions and appeasements were not the correct approach, and that

complete equality could only be achieved by demanding it without compromise. DuBois also believed that the "Talented Tenth," his name for the small percentage of educated blacks, must lead the way for the masses of blacks who still lived in poverty and lacked educational opportunities. DuBois's ideas were reflected in the newly formed black middle class, which, although small, sought to exert an influence on behalf of all blacks. The new efforts of this black elite were centered in Harlem, where a large percentage of migrating blacks ended up, turning the area into a rich, thriving center of black culture. The new energy generated there by jazz musicians, writers, artists, actors, and intellectuals became known as the Harlem Renaissance. This artistic and intellectual movement confronted the racial prejudices of

white America by demanding equal recognition for their talent and by depicting the injustices experienced by African-Americans. But ironically, although the artists of the Harlem Renaissance intended their works to promote better conditions for blacks less fortunate than themselves, few blacks around the country were even aware of the movement. In fact, it was more often whites who comprised the audiences and readerships of the products of the Harlem Renaissance. A cult of the primitive, which celebrated all things exotic and sensual, had become all the rage in New York and many wealthy whites flocked to Harlem to witness and participate in the revelry. But wealthy whites were essential to the livelihood of many black artists and writers who relied on their patronage, a fact regretted by many who felt that the artistic products of African Americans were muted to appeal to the tastes of the whites they depended on. Although the stock market crash of 1929 brought much of the activity in Harlem to an end, the creative energies of those involved had not abated, and many, like Zora Neale Hurston, produced their best work through the 1930s.

Race Colonies

After the Civil War, former slaves formed a number of all-black towns all over the South, in an effort to escape the segregation and discrimination they experienced amongst whites. By 1914, approximately thirty such towns were in existence. Eatonville, Florida, the town where Zora Neale Hurston grew up and the setting for much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was the first such town to be incorporated and to win the right of self-governance. In Eatonville, the Jim Crow laws, that segregated public schools, housing, restaurants, theaters, and drinking fountains all over the South, did not exist.

Critical Overview

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* first appeared, it was warmly received by white critics. Lucille Tompkins of the *New York Times Book Review* called it "a well nigh perfect story—a little sententious at the start, but the rest is simple and beautiful and shining with humor." But many of Hurston's fellow writers of the Harlem Renaissance criticized the novel for not addressing "serious" issues, namely strained race relations. Alain Locke, reviewing for *Opportunity*, recognized the author's "gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk hu-

mor," but he asks, "when will the Negro novelist of maturity ... come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?" Richard Wright, in his review in *New Masses*, had even more scathing objections to the novel. According to Wright, "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh." Wright felt that instead of taking on "serious" subjects, she writes to entertain "a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." Many objected to the use of dialect in the novel, a difficult subject for Harlem Renaissance writers who felt that black speech had been exploited and ridiculed by mainstream theater and literature. As a result, many were reluctant to try to realistically depict the speech patterns of the black folk, and they saw in Hurston's use of dialect a degrading picture of rural blacks.

As a result of such criticisms, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* soon disappeared from print. But in the late 1960s, when interest in African-American and women's studies began to take hold, a number of African-American women across the country rediscovered the book and made it an underground sensation. Photocopies of the novel circulated at conferences, and Alice Walker's essay "Looking for Zora," published in *Ms.* magazine in 1975, galvanized efforts to get the novel back into print. Since 1978, it has been widely available, and the scholarly interest in it has been intense. In fact, previous judgements against the novel have been overturned by a number of respectable critics who have helped establish *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a classic of African-American literature and helped procure it a prominent position in the American literary canon.

Most significantly, recent critics have recognized a celebration of black culture in the novel that belies any notion that Hurston is pandering to a white audience. As Cheryl Wall explains, in her article "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," She asserted that black people, while living in a racist society that denied their humanity, had created an "alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings." And, she argues, by invoking this culture, Hurston shows us that black men and women "attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it." One way that Hurston embraced the culture of rural, southern blacks, was to depict its folklore and language in a way that relished its creativity. Contemporary critics praise her for this above all else, for in her search for a suitable language for African-

American literature, she initiated an effort to free black language from domination by the white culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains the significance of this act: "For Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self." In this way, critics have been able to show that Hurston, far from ignoring the serious social issues of her day, was engaged in a serious project of resuscitating a language and culture that was in danger of being corrupted by racist oppression. In fact, Gay Wilentz argues, in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, that the novel is one of "resistance" because it portrays "the pressure of the dominant culture on the thoughts and actions of the all-black community of Eatonville as well as blacks as a whole." In other words, although she largely ignored the overt racism that critics of the Harlem Renaissance wanted her to address, she explored the more subtle and perhaps more dangerous kind of racism that infects the black culture and makes it despise itself. The racial pride that Hurston preached, then, was as radical a statement as any of the Harlem Renaissance, contemporary critics argue.

Although scholars have been eager to embrace the novel's celebration of black culture, much more problematic has been understanding and accepting its perspective on gender. With the book's rediscovery in the 1960s, feminists lauded it as an expression of female self-development and empowerment. More recently, though, many scholars have begun to question such a reading. Jennifer Jordon argues, for example, in her article in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, that "Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements." Furthermore, as Mary Helen Washington insists in her article "I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands': Emergent Female Hero," Janie never becomes a speaking subject, because "Hurston's strategy of having much of Janie's tale told by an omniscient third person rather than by a first person narrator undercuts the development of Janie's 'voice.'" But most troubling to critics has been the fact that Janie seems to discover herself in the context of a relationship with a man, Tea Cake, rather than on her own, a defect that many see as remedied by Janie's killing of Tea Cake. "[A]s a feminist," Claire Crabtree argues, Hurston "did not want Janie to find fulfillment in a man, but rather in her new-found self." But for others, the book does not end there, rather with her return to Eatonville, which seems to signal an end to her

self-exploration, according to Washington, who claims that "left without a man, she (Janie) exists in a position of stasis." But Wall refuses to read the ending as "tragic." "For with Tea Cake as her guide, Jan[i]e has explored the soul of her culture and learned how to value herself."

Criticism

Lynn Domina

Domina, an author and instructor at Hofstra University, describes Hurston's novel in terms of Janie Stark's "voice" and how her ability to express herself evolves through the course of the story.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is generally considered Zora Neale Hurston's most important piece of fiction. Hurston, a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, also published anthropological texts, including *Tell My Horse*, and an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published in 1937, and was quite popular, although some critics argued that she should have written a more aggressive protest similar to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* went out of print for several years, it came back into print during the late 1970s and has since remained a central text in many high school and college courses. In this novel, Hurston explores social and personal relations within black families and communities, while also examining issues of gender and class. One theme through which these issues of gender, race, and class are examined is voice. At several points in the text, Janie Starks, the protagonist, is prohibited from speaking, while at other points she chooses not to speak. Silence, then, is sometimes used as a tool of oppression and at other times as a tool of power.

During the course of the novel, Janie is married three times. The men differ from each other in significant ways, and each marriage helps Janie define her own desires and goals in life. Her first husband, Brother Logan Killicks, is chosen for her by her grandmother, Nanny, who recognizes that Janie is beginning to feel adult sexual desires, although Janie herself might not articulate her new longings this way. Because she has observed "shiftless Johnny Taylor" kissing Janie, Nanny believes Janie will soon act more dramatically on these desires and therefore urges her to marry a responsible and conventional man. Although Janie responds that

Logan Killicks “look like some ole skullhead in de grave yard,” Nanny arranges the marriage because she worries about Janie’s future. Realizing she is probably close to death, Nanny reminds Janie that she “ain’t got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo’self. De thought uh you bein’ kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin’ thing.”

Janie’s first marriage occurs, then, despite her resistance. Because of her youth and the lack of options available to her as a young and comparatively poor woman, Janie cannot act on her own desires; she marries Logan Killicks because she seems to have no other choice. Although she hopes love will follow marriage, Janie is soon disappointed, for Logan grows more rather than less distasteful to her. He refuses to bathe regularly and soon suggests that Janie should help him with the plowing. He leaves to buy another mule, one that would be “all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ’im.” This scene is reminiscent of a statement Nanny had made to Janie earlier, that “woman is de mule uh de world.” Janie, however, decides that she will not be treated as a mule even if she has to reject the values her grandmother has taught her.

Janie meets Joe Starks, who invites her to accompany him to a town made “all outa colored folks.” Because Logan begins to insult Janie’s family history, she decides to leave him for Joe, who initially seems more considerate and companionable. Soon, however, Janie realizes that Joe perceives her simply as his trophy. He will be mayor of the new town, and she will be nothing more or less than the mayor’s wife. Although the townspeople congregate on the porch of Joe’s store, where Janie often works as a clerk, Joe forbids her to participate in their jokes or storytelling. Those conversations, Joe suggests, are not appropriate for a woman of her class. Because Janie is once again deprived of her voice, she can never be fully a member of this community and instead must live in emotional isolation.

During her marriage to Joe, the mule again appears as a symbol. A man in their town, Matt Bonner, owns a yellow mule which he seems to be working to death. When Joe overhears Janie quietly protesting, he forces Matt to sell the mule to him for \$5.00, impressing his companions with his ability to satisfy his financial whims. Joe permits the mule to live the rest of his days in comparative ease, but when the mule dies, he forbids Janie to participate in the mock funeral the others hold. Similarly, although Joe doesn’t want to work Janie like a mule in the manner of Logan Killicks, he has

What Do I Read Next?



- A classic feminist novel, *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, follows a well-to-do white woman from Louisiana on a perilous path of self-discovery. The novel challenges the strict mores of a society that provides only one path of self-fulfillment for women, namely marriage and motherhood.
- *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. DuBois is a classic document of African-American cultural history. In this collection of essays, DuBois articulates, among other things, his influential theory of “double consciousness,” which describes how African-Americans wrestle between two identities as black and American.
- *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, was Zora Neale Hurston’s second book, and it was the first collection of black folklore published in America.
- David Levering Lewis’ *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981) is a classic historical study of the Harlem Renaissance. Lewis surveys all the major writers, artists, and intellectuals associated with the movement.
- *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison portrays a young black girl’s obsession with blue eyes and blond hair. Having accepted society’s definition of beauty as white, she has learned to despise her own black features, which leads to tragic consequences.
- Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) is a powerful depiction of how the oppressive environment of Chicago determines the fate of Bigger Thomas, a young black man who is doomed to act out the worst fears of racist whites.

metaphorically “bought” her as a demonstration of his own power.

Once again, Janie must choose either to accept what seems to be her fate or to actively oppose it. When Joe attempts to humiliate her publicly, “Janie

took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's [Joe's] face, and that was something that hadn't been done before." She insults his masculinity, shaming him before the other men. After this, although Janie and Joe continue to live together, they live emotionally separate lives until Joe dies.

Janie's third husband's given name is Vergible Woods, although his nickname is Tea Cake. Most people cannot understand Janie's attraction to Tea Cake because he is neither conventional like Logan Killicks nor a middle-class businessman like Joe Starks. Rather, Tea Cake makes much of his money through gambling, and when he isn't gambling, he's often playing the guitar and planning a party. In addition, his complexion is very dark, at a time when some people (represented in this novel by the character of Mrs. Turner) believed that lighter skin was more attractive. Simultaneously, Tea Cake is several years younger than Janie, so some people suspect his motives. Yet Janie enjoys herself with Tea Cake more than she has with any other man. Tea Cake does not limit her to a particular role; he enjoys life and invites Janie to be simply herself. He invites her to play checkers on the porch as Joe never had, "and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play." Perhaps most significantly, "Look how she had been able to talk with him right off!"

The shift in Janie's character is demonstrated through several small changes. Although her luxurious hair is one of her most attractive characteristics, Joe had insisted she wear it bound up because he was jealous that other men might enjoy it. After Joe dies, she begins to wear her hair in a long braid. When she marries Tea Cake, she begins to dress in overalls rather than in middle-class dresses because she finds the pants more comfortable and convenient. She also begins to work in the fields after she and Tea Cake move to the Everglades, not because Tea Cake decides to treat her like a mule as Logan Killicks had or because Tea Cake fails to support her as a more "proper" husband would, but because she enjoys Tea Cake's company and the social interaction that occurs among the other workers. Janie hence achieves her greatest sense of fulfillment when she disregards conventional values and aspirations.

But the novel doesn't conclude with Janie and Tea Cake living happily ever after. During a hurricane, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while attempting to rescue Janie from drowning, and he himself contracts rabies. As his illness progresses,

he becomes increasingly paranoid and begins to distrust Janie's faithfulness. When he threatens to shoot her, Janie kills him in self-defense, though she had hoped he would die peacefully. Yet, even as Tea Cake dies, Janie desires to comfort him: "A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead. No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right to weep. Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. She had to hug him tight for soon he would be gone, and she had to tell him for the last time." This hour is like eternity for Janie, however, because its effects will be permanent for her.

Janie is tried for Tea Cake's murder. Although many of her black acquaintances are angry that Tea Cake is dead, the all-white jury acquits her. Critics have debated the significance of the trial scene, for Janie's testimony is summarized rather than dramatized. While some critics have suggested that this scene indicates that Janie has once again lost (or been deprived of) her ability to speak, others suggest that she now can choose when and how to speak. During the trial, Janie is deprived of a community, since the black male and female witnesses oppose her, while the people who compose the jury and support her are all white men. Perhaps her voice is silent here not because she is unable to speak but because communication necessitates a receptive audience.

Readers must not forget, however, that the entire novel is in fact spoken in Janie's voice. The novel is framed by two chapters in which Janie is speaking to her best friend, Pheoby, and the action or plot of the novel is the story she tells Pheoby. So although the point of view frequently shifts in the novel, from one character's perspective to another's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, finally, Janie's story.

Source: Lynn Domina, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998.

Claire Crabtree

Crabtree maintains that the close connection between the themes of feminist/black self-determination and traditional or folk material needs to be further explored. She dwells, among other things, on the storytelling frame, on Hurston's use of language, and her incorporation of a folk consciousness in her narration.

Recent years have seen a renewal of interest in the work of Zora Neale Hurston marked by the publication of Robert Hemenway's 1977 biography and the anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*. Articles by Lloyd W. Brown, S. Jay Walker and Mary Helen Washington discuss Hurston's best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in terms of its themes of feminism and black self-determination. An area that remains virtually untapped in Hurston criticism is the intimate connection between these themes and the folkloric themes and motifs which Hurston has embedded in her novel. Critics have largely neglected or misunderstood Hurston's conscious use of traditional or "folk" materials in the novel. Further, most readers find the ending of the novel dissonant and see it as weakening the work; while a recognition of the uses Hurston intended for traditional materials will not thoroughly justify her authorial decisions, it can help to explain the apparent weakness of the ending and to show that the novel presents a rhetoric of authenticity—an implicit assertion that it represents "real" black life—introduced initially by the storytelling frame and reinforced by various techniques throughout the novel.

It may be useful to delineate four aspects of the transformation of folk material into the body of the tale of Janie Crawford's journey through three marriages to a final position of self-realization. They are: Hurston's use of the storytelling "frame" of the story as well as of other conventions from oral tradition; her use of the language, metaphor and symbol of a specific rural community; her incorporation of certain kinds of gaming and other performances as incidents within the narrative; and her attempt to situate the narrative voice in a collective folk consciousness toward the end of the book. Folklore is, in fact, so thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the novel as to be inextricably bound to the themes of feminism and Black self-determination which Hurston is exploring. The value of the folk experience is itself as strong an assertion of the novel as the need of Blacks for self-determination and the right of women to be autonomous....

Hurston presents Janie's story within a storytelling frame, but equally significant, as a story that is designed to be repeated. In folkloristic terms, Janie's story is a memorate or true experience narrative placed within a fictional framework but nonetheless privileging itself and asserting its own authenticity. The form of a folktale is in part determined by its replicability; it must be developed

through a series of events that can be recalled and reconstructed by various tellers....

Within the storytelling frame Janie's life is depicted as a spiritual journey, in Janie's words, a journey to the horizon and back as "a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life ... De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin.'" Janie follows a pattern familiar to folklorists of a young person's journey from home to face adventure and various dangers, followed by a triumphant homecoming. Like the hero of a folktale, Janie Crawford leaves home behind her, meets strangers who become either allies or enemies, expresses the transformations she undergoes through costumes and disguises which are invested with special significance, experiences reversals in her perceptions of individual people and events, and returns cleansed, enlightened and alone. The folktale's repetition of events in a series of three is duplicated in Janie's three marriages, as well as by her movement out of the rural community of Nanny, her grandmother, and her first husband, to the town where she keeps a store with Joe Starks, and finally to the "muck" of the Everglades where she experiences joy and bereavement through Tea Cake, her third husband.

The three marriages and the three communities in which Janie moves represent increasingly wide circles of experience and opportunities for expression of personal choice. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, had in fact been a slave and had borne a child to her master. The marriage Nanny forces upon Janie represents a practical arrangement which brings with it another kind of servitude. Feminist themes fuse with themes of Black self-determination as Janie discards her apron, historically the badge of the slave woman as well as of the docile wife, and goes off with Joe Starks. Hurston justifies Janie's abandonment of her first marriage, not on the grounds that Janie feels no love for Killicks, who "look like some ole skullhead in de graveyard," but because Killicks decides to buy a mule for Janie to work the fields with—since she has borne him no heir. Janie needs freedom and an expansion of her horizons more than she needs love—a theme which will surface again, particularly when the novel's ending deflates the romanticism of the relationship with Tea Cake and excises the romantic hero from the heroine's life yet leaves her stronger rather than weaker. Here Hurston consciously rejects the happy ending of the traditional novel.

The second marriage to a man of higher ambitions puts Janie in touch with a larger world, that of the all-Black town which Joe founds, but leaves

her stifled and controlled by Joe's white-inspired values. Like Killicks, Joe dictates Janie's work and prevents her from being a full participant in the social life of the town. Only after Joe's death does Janie find the freedom and spontaneity which she values and seeks, in her marriage to Tea Cake. Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons literally and figuratively by transplanting her to the Everglades to mingle with other itinerant workers as well as by simply encouraging her to determine her own work and to take part in the "play"—the music, dancing and gaming—of the workers in the "muck."

In recent years critics have been unanimous in praising the vitality of Hurston's language: Hurston is a master at transforming the language of a folk group, in this case the West Florida Blacks of the town in which she herself grew up, into convincing dialogue. The authenticity of the language, although documented, is much less important as a "slice of life" than as an implicit claim of authority about Black life. The success of Hurston's novel depends upon the melding of folkloric and fictional elements in such a way as to create characters whose speech is both reflective of the language of the folk and highly individualized. Hurston's novel asserts itself as a statement that goes beyond the limitations of the local color story because her characters and their speech are plausible, individualized and enduringly interesting....

Both the unselfconscious use of metaphoric language and the more performance oriented forms of expression found in the novel represent men's and women's use of imagination to enliven and elaborate upon the events of their lives. The very limitation and deprivation of life in rural areas and among poor people can produce, as Hurston knew from her work as a folklorist and anthropologist, a flowering of highly imaginative modes of thought and expression. If Hurston had sought simply to preserve the oral culture of this region of West Florida through her novel, she would not have produced a successful novel, but rather an ethnography. However, she instead has transformed folk materials into fiction. Specific performances in the novel symbolize for Janie the kind of active participation in life which has been denied to Blacks, women, and the poor by society and circumstance. The mock funeral of Matt Bonner's mule is linked in the reader's mind with Nanny's notion of woman as "de mule of the world," who carries the burdens laid on her by whites and by Black males. The political statements implicit in the courting rituals enacted in front of Joe Starks' store suggest the sexual politics operative in Janie's marriage to Joe, as

well as in her earlier marriage to Logan Killicks. In each of the instances, the woman is seen as valuable only as long as she hesitates; once she is won over and possessed in some way, she ceases to arouse interest or be perceived as valuable. The mule becomes a motif linked to Nanny, Killicks and Starks. It was, in fact, Killicks' decision to put Janie to work behind a mule which set the stage for her elopement with Starks.... Hurston's use of a narrative voice that parallels and reinforces Janie's expanding view of the world makes it clear that folklore is integrated into all levels of the text. In fact, the narrative voice, always close to but not identical with Janie's consciousness, becomes more prominent toward the end of the book, as if to suggest that the folkloric material is directly relevant to Janie's final achievement of harmony and peace. Folklore is a thematic element, as well as a component of the themes of Janie's search for identity and self-determination as a Black and as a woman.

If folklore is simply one way for men and women to order and interpret their lives and environments, then the title, whose relevance to the book as a whole is not transparent, becomes more accessible. The eyes of the folk watch God and the elements for signs of safety and indications of where and how each one fits into society and the world. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a book about a woman's journey of self-discovery, but also about a woman's exploration of the physical and social worlds available to her. If it were a simple tale of romantic love ... Janie's loss of Tea Cake at the end would be a tragedy, depriving her life of the meaning she had finally found. But this is not the case; Tea Cake represents something more to Janie than the presence of a single man. He is represented as a wanderer who shows Janie who she is and can be and who magically remains present to her even after his death.

Tea Cake combines a sense of his own identity as a Black and a concomitant ability to set his own standards for himself with a natural acceptance of and faith in Janie, which enables her to define her own standards for herself. The heart of the life that Janie so much enjoys in the Florida "muck" is folk expression in the form of playing and gaming in the fields or singing and tale-telling in the cabin and "jook."

The flood and Tea Cake's death toward the end of the novel are problematic from a traditional critical point of view. Janie's shooting of Tea Cake after he has been maddened by a bite from a rabid

dog during the flood seems implausible. A traditional female protagonist would be happily placed in an appropriate marriage at the end of the book, or else would experience the loss of her man as a tragedy. Again Hurston challenges conventional norms by integrating the expectations of a folktale with the form of the novel, for Janie returns from her adventure into the big world with Tea Cake much as a young male character in a folktale returns home both richer and wiser than he left. Further, she has struggled with the giant—that is, with storms and death—and returned victorious. In the folk tale, the magical teacher is dispensed with as the hero triumphs, and so is Tea Cake left behind on Janie’s journey. The flood serves to remove the characters from the life of social interaction in Eatonville and later in the Everglades and puts them into the elemental struggle of natural disaster. Here the narrative voice becomes strong and increasingly suggestive of a sort of collective, choric voice. Storm, flood and death are personified. The effect of this shift is an emphasis on the universal nature of Janie’s experience.

When the narrator says of Janie, Tea Cake and their friends as they wait out the storm, “They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God,” Hurston is speaking of the universal human situation as well as of the specific plights of these characters. Aspects of performance and folk culture are portrayed by Hurston as an expression of courage and creativity in the face of everyday realities such as poverty and deprivation, as well as catastrophe and imminent death. The book’s title suggests that men and women, confronting “dark” unknowns such as loss and death, create or recognize a force behind reality that makes sense out of it...

The apparent weakness of the ending of the novel is perhaps explained by the possibility that Hurston, as a feminist, did not want Janie to find fulfillment in a man, but rather in her new-found self, and thus tried to re-orient the form towards the traditional story of the young male. There is a suggestion of the literary theme of the birth of the artist, as well as of the folk theme of the triumphant young male.

Source: Claire Crabtree, “The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism, and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” in *Southern Literary Journal*, Spring, 1985, pp. 54–66.

Ellen Cantarow

Cantarow, a white feminist on a panel with a black feminist, speaks out on sex, race, and criti-

*cism, comparing Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and contends that, of the two heroines, Janie, a slave’s granddaughter, comes off the stronger compared to Edna, from an upper-class white family.*

I’d like to begin with a memory that came to my mind as I was re-reading the two books we’re to discuss this morning. Two years ago, when I was teaching at SUNY/Old Westbury, my car broke down on my way to class. I found myself in one of those high-class, desolate neighborhoods. You know. Plush desolation. No stores. Beautifully manicured streets but not a soul in sight. Hundred thousand dollar houses surrounded by fences and exquisitely tended shrubbery. A woman let me in at one of these houses. She looked to be in her late fifties. It was noon, but she was still dressed in a robe. She let me use her phone. And then she begged me to have coffee with her. She told me her father had just died and that she was in mourning. She told me about her husband, a corporation lawyer who was away most of the time. And she told me about her children. “I’ve lived for them,” she said.

The room we were sitting in was elegant. “The softest rugs and carpets covered the floors. Rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows. There were paintings selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls.” That description is lifted from *The Awakening*. It occurs when Edna and Leonce Pontellier have returned to their house in New Orleans from the vacation on Grand Isle that takes up the first half of the book. The description might just as well have been of the house in Long Island, or the houses in an upper-middle-class neighborhood I grew up in in Philadelphia. I knew women like the Long Island woman while I was growing up. One was a teacher married to a neurosurgeon. Mrs. Stevens was the aunt of a friend of mine. What always struck me as odd was that while she had her own profession she said her real life was her husband and children—much as Adele Ratignolle, Edna’s friend in *The Awakening*, says her life revolves around her husband and children. In her fifties Mrs. Stevens tried to commit suicide. Later she became ill. Now, she’s bedridden.

Women like Mrs. Stevens were sustained in their lives by black women’s labor. Black women reared such white women’s children—fed them, sang to them, nurtured them. It is a black woman—a licensed practical nurse who made it to that job from being a domestic for many years—who now

nurses Mrs. Stevens. Mrs. Burden's life has been different from her employer's. While Mrs. Stevens' tragedy is rooted in the dependency on her family, and the lack of self-confidence that's bound up with such dependency, Mrs. Burden's life problems have to do with continuous toil and with two unhappy marriages to men who might have been like Janie's first two husbands in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Now, the reason I began with these sketches from my own experience is to point out that history has a long reach into our present lives, and to point out that the lives of white women and black women are intimately intertwined.

But let me come back to that and for the moment I'll turn to *The Awakening*. The reason I flashed on that morning in Long Island was because *The Awakening*, for all that it portrays Creole society and a round of group swims, parties, musicales, is a very solitary sort of book. It is about Edna's isolation, her imprisonment. She's imprisoned in her marriage. She's imprisoned in the house I described earlier. She's imprisoned as a possession, a display of her husband's wealth. But if *The Awakening* is about imprisonment, it's also about the possibilities of freedom. The foil for all the images of luxurious dalliance in the summer of Grand Isle, for all the images of household luxury, is one Chopin gives us at the beginning of the book. Edna describes a walk she took in her childhood in Kentucky through a meadow: "It seemed as big as an ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist.... My sunbonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it." Edna can see only straight ahead, neither to right nor left. The sunbonnet obstructs breadth of vision. The stretch of green goes on forever. There are no landmarks in such undifferentiated loveliness, no certain goal. Which reminds us that clear visions of liberation even forty or fifty years after Seneca Falls were very difficult if not impossible for most white middle- and upper-class women. There were those female fetters—fetters not just of clothing but of ideology—which foreclosed a world in which men like Leonce Pontellier and Robert Lebrun were free to come and go as they pleased....

The lack of productive work is historically significant. By 1899, when *The Awakening* was published, remunerated labor was not readily available to white women of Edna's class. Before the Civil War, the home was still a center of production, and

upper-class white women really did have a role in that productivity. But by Edna's time the factory had taken over such production. Men like Leonce Pontellier were out in the world of industrial production, and captains of it. Women like Edna were the ornaments that proved a man's success in business and the professions. It's out of such history that the white women's movement of the late sixties and early seventies put such a stress on the phrase "meaningful work."

But let's think about that phrase. Meaningful work. For black women like Mrs. Burden, work has been meaningful historically, but the meaning is very different from what I've been talking about. While Edna was being shut up in the parlor, the great grandmother of Mrs. Burden, Mrs. Stevens' nurse, and Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, were on the auction block. The black woman was colonized. The black woman had labor imposed on her. She was used for manual labor and house service. And there was that other kind of labor: she was "a breeder woman." And she was sexually exploited by the white men whose own wives were up there on the pedestal.

This is the background for what Janie's grandmother tells her at the beginning of the novel. She's caught Janie, in the midst of Janie's own sexual awakening, kissing Johnny Taylor over the fence. She slaps her, then she sits with Janie in her lap, and half-weeping tells Janie why she wants her to get married, in a decent marriage, quickly. "De nigger woman is de mule of de world ... Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do ... Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood sow and ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither ... Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin on high but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Ah can't die easy thinkin maybe de men folks white or black is makin a spit cup outa you."

So Janie's nanny marries her off to the elderly Logan Killicks, who disgusts Janie sexually but who has a pedestal for her to stand on. To be precise, sixty acres of land and a nice house. When Joe Starks comes along down the road one day, Janie's attracted to his exuberance, his sweet talk, and a power she sees in him. So she goes off with him and marries him and for a while she lives vicariously off that power. But Joe, like Logan before him, considers Janie a possession. Like Logan, he wants her to work for, not with him. He loves what he calls her plentiful hair, but he makes her bind it

up in a headrag while she minds his store. He's your complete male supremacist. At one point Janie says to him, "You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin Ah see." "Dat's cause you need tellin," says Jody, "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows ... they sho don't think none theirselves."

This marriage is ready for the dust bin. Like Edna, Janie's an accessory to her husband's position and work. But there are deep differences. For one thing, Janie works in Jody's general store where she finds black folk who tell the tall tales, the "lies" Hurston loved and wrote about to reclaim the roots of a people. Janie gets sustenance from that company and that culture just as Hurston did in the Eatonville where she grew up, and in her travels collecting material for her book on black folklore, for her novels, and for her books on voodoo. It's in Jody's store, not in solitary confinement, in that society among those black folk, that Janie makes her break with Jody. Someone's said she hasn't cut a plug of tobacco right. Jody says, "I god amight! A woman stay around uh store till she get as old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Dont stand dere rollin yo pop eyes at me wid yo rump hangin nearly to yo knees!" "Then, too," Hurston's narrator continues. "Janie took the middle of the floor ... 'Stop mixin up mah doins wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not ... Ah aint no young gal no mo but den Ah aint no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But ahm a woman every inch of me and ah know it. Dats a whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but taint nothin to it but yo big voice. Humph! Talkin bout *me* lookin old! When you pull down you britches you look lak de change uh life.' 'Great God from Zion!' gasps a bystander, 'Y'll really playin the dozens tonight.'"

The dozens. A verbal artillery Edna doesn't have at her disposal. And there are other resources Edna doesn't have, which I'll return to in a moment. But for the minute I'll just say that between the two awakenings we're talking about today, I prefer Janie's. It's a lot better than suicide. Janie awakens to what the meaning of a white, upper-class style of marriage is, and she rejects it. She tells her friend Pheoby, "[My grandma] was borned in slavery ... sittin on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me ... Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She

didn't have time to think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin. De object wuz tuh get dere. So ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby. Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin' extry and Ah aint read de common news yet."

Janie comes down off the pedestal when she stands up to Jody. And finally she's her own woman, on her own, after he dies. She meets Tea Cake, and with him she finds both companionship and sexual fulfillment. He's a gambler, a guitar player. Whites would call him shiftless. Hurston reclaims him, turns the stereotype against its creator. He should be a revelation to white readers. And so should Tea Cake and Janie's love, as opposed to all the stereotypes of black sexuality and marriage the Daniel Patrick Moynihans of this country have laid on us.

But if there's one thing that mars Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, it's Tea Cake's sometimes lingering feelings that he should be the boss. At one point he beats Janie. A friend says, "Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She just cries, eh Tea Cake? ... mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out my jaw teeth ... git her good and mad, she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets."

But Janie has that sort of strength, too. She fights Jody physically when she discovers he's playing around with Nunkie. Now I think Janie's psychological and physical strength come, ironically, out of precisely the experience her nanny wants to forget. It was W. E. B. Du Bois who captured the contradiction of black women's forced labor when he said: "Our women in black had freedom thrust contemptuously upon them. With that freedom they are buying an untrammelled independence and dear as is the price they pay for it, it will in the end be worth every taunt and groan." At one point Hurston describes Janie and Tea Cake working side by side on the muck, picking beans: "All day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back made Janie popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on. Then Tea Cake would help get supper afterwards."

I don't think it's accidental that the work, the sexuality, and the housework get all mixed together by Hurston here. It's a glimpse of real equality between a man and a woman in marriage. It's the kind of marriage that's impossible for Edna. And it's a glimpse on the meshing of work and marriage so much of the contemporary white women's move-

ment has stressed. The deep partnership so many of us yearn for. It's a good possibility *Their Eyes*, in part autobiography, was wish-fulfillment. For Hurston herself, a woman on her own at home in the world, in Eatonville, in New Orleans, in Haiti, amongst the intelligentsia of Harlem, had deep conflicts between her life and her career.

There is another contradiction in what I've been saying this morning. Something else that nags at me. It's that in the comparison I've been making, Edna comes off the weaker of the two women. To contemplate Janie—her resourcefulness, her fulfillment in marriage, the power of language at her disposal—to contemplate all this, and her sexuality, is to have a vicarious experience of real strength. This poses difficulties, since finally my roots aren't in the tradition Hurston is writing out of.... For counterparts to Janie in white literature I must, then, turn perhaps not to Chopin's *The Awakening*, but to Colette's *The Vagabond*, or to Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.

Which is to raise a final question. What am I, a white feminist journalist and critic, doing talking about Hurston's work at all? Because she gives me not just vicarious strength, but also understanding. Never, for example, can I see women like Mrs. Stevens' nurse without thinking of women like Janie. Never can I speak with black women, working-or middle-class, without considering what I've learned of black life through writing like Hurston's.

Source: Ellen Cantarow, "Sex, Race, and Criticism: Thoughts of a White Feminist on Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Radical Teacher*, September, 1978, pp. 30-33.

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