**Voices of Independence and Community: The Prose of Zora Neale Hurston**

On the Works of Zora Neale Hurston  
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**Introduction**

For years unknown, forgotten, or simply ignored by literary scholarship, the work of Zora Neale Hurston has been resurrected and is now widely read, studied, and praised. Hurston's impressive body of work includes four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, and over fifty short stories, essays, and plays.

A key figure among the literati of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was popular during her time and her work was generally well-received by mainstream American reviewers, but several prominent African-American male authors criticized and dismissed her for not writing socially realistic novels documenting the urban black experience and white racism—the dominant style of the day. Hurston's early short stories and the novel she is best known for, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), characteristically embraced black folklore and rural culture.

Hurston was most productive during the Depression; she was one of the most widely acclaimed African-American authors between 1925 and 1945. By the 1950s, when her political views turned more conservative, Hurston had moved away from her most common themes and thus her creative inspiration, and her work disappeared into obscurity. Her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), is typically considered a disappointment, if not a failure.

Hurston struggled financially and at one point made her living as a housekeeper; she died in obscurity in 1960 while living in a county welfare home, and was buried in an unmarked grave at a segregated cemetery. Her work, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was out of print for nearly thirty years after its first publication, virtually disappeared.

A revival of Hurston's work in the seventies can be at least partially attributed to Alice Walker's seminal essay "The Search for Zora Neale Hurston," a chronicle of Walker's search for and then marking of Hurston's grave that was published in *Ms*. magazine in 1974. Now, nearly thirty years later, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a popular title on college syllabi, and Hurston's writing receives wide scholarship and academic attention.

Hurston's fiction, which had been derided by a few key critics for being quaint, now seems progressive and unique for its time. In works such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston dared to explore the life of an African-American woman reaching self-autonomy, challenging notions of individuality and community, and questioning sexism within African-American society. Hurston's exploration of rural Southern black communities and the rich voices of black folklore proudly affirms and embraces African-American culture.

**The Harlem Renaissance**

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Harlem was a mecca for African-American artists, writers, intellectuals, and musicians; it served as the center for the New Negro Movement, later known as the Harlem Renaissance. This movement focused on establishing a new cultural identity, fighting against the white stereotypes of blacks and embracing autonomy. During a time when many Southern African-Americans had migrated to the North seeking employment, and the country was steeped in Jim Crow laws and racist ideologies, hope for the future and belief in the need for changes was reflected in the arts.

Between 1919 and 1930 more African-American authors were published in greater numbers than during any other decade in America prior to the 1960s. Scholar and critic Alain Locke, also an early friend of Hurston's, was one of the main proponents of the New Negro Movement, urging young writers to "speak for the masses by expressing the race spirit" (Hemenway, 41). He encouraged artists to utilize their folk background and African heritage in the creation of their art, with the future promising progress.

The Harlem Renaissance occurred during America's Jazz Age; while Harlem was a vibrant center for African-American arts, culture, and politics, Harlem's speakeasies and jazz clubs became fashionable places for whites to gather. Whites were drawn to Harlem for its "primitive" and "exotic" aspect, and often attended parties and social functions, only to return to their white neighborhoods by the next morning. During this time many African-American artists, including Hurston, were funded by white patrons.

Although Hurston actually only resided in Harlem for two years, her influence on and association with the Harlem Renaissance is legendary. Robert Hemenway explains in his biography of Hurston that, despite disputes about Hurston's conservative political views in her later years and her controversial statements about such topics as segregation and Jim Crow, she was a "dedicated Harlem Renaissance artist," and through her writing she hoped to "transfer the life of the people, the folk ethos, into the accepted modes of formalized fiction." (Hemenway, 56)

Arriving in New York in 1925, Hurston wrote several short stories and plays in the twenties and organized the literary magazine *Fire!*, a journal devoted to younger Harlem artists, with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman in 1926. Although the editors only published one issue, Hurston's involvement demonstrates the active role Hurston played within the African-American artistic community. Her relationship with some of these artists, though, was somewhat tenuous, as demonstrated in 1931, when close friends Hurston and Hughes fought over*Mule Bone*, a play they co-created.

Hurston's first book was not published until 1934. Her Southern background and the focus of her writing differed from many of her contemporaries and critics, including Richard Wright and Alain Locke, who were invested in the style of social realism and naturalism popular in the thirties. Writers hoped to depict "real" African-American life, debunking racist stereotypes by embracing community values, political ideology, and a positive self-image. Hurston's work did not fall neatly into this category; her writing, rich with lyrical prose and folkloric symbols, focused on a small community of African-Americans in the South and their relationships with each other, without overtly addressing society's widespread racism. With her strong, independent female characters and her focus on relationships between African Americans instead of confrontations between African Americans and whites, it is not surprising that Hurston was criticized. Few other writers were charting the psychological independence of African-American women, nor were writers focusing on rural Southern African-American communities.

**Black Folklore**

Hurston—flamboyant, outspoken, and independent—was a Southerner, and even while living in New York, she wrote about the rural South, embracing its folklore and the small town traditions of storytelling. She was known on the New York scene for her comical and outrageous "Eatonville" stories, which she liked to tell at parties and gatherings. As Hurston succinctly states in her autobiography, "I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue."

Hurston first began collecting folklore after enrolling at Barnard College in 1925 to study anthropology under the renowned anthropologist Frank Boas. Hurston was thirty-four years old when she enrolled, but throughout her life she claimed to be ten years younger, passing herself off as a woman in her twenties during the time of the New Negro Movement, when strong emphasis was placed on the youth of the artists. Hurston made her first anthropological trip to Florida in 1927; nearly a year later, funded by her patron Charlotte Mason, Hurston returned to Florida to collect black folklore, and much of this productive field work appeared in her book *Mules and Men* (1932), the first book of black folklore collected by an African American. Immersing herself in the culture of several rural Southern African-American communities, she recorded stories, songs, sermons, proverbs, super-stitions, and folktales while actively participating in the communities.

Folklore, usually defined as the traditional beliefs and legends of a people, especially when formed as part of an oral tradition, had been a part of Hurston's life since childhood. "I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folklore'," she wrote. "In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top." Still, she needed "the spy-glass of Anthropology" to distance herself from this culture, so that she could fully see its richness and layers. In "Zora Neale Hurston's Traveling Blues," Critic Cheryl Wall states, "The cultural relativity of anthropology freed Hurston from the need to defend her subjects' alleged inferiority."

Hurston was attracted to folklore because she could see that African Americans "were creating an art that did not need the sanction of 'culture' to affirm its beauty" (Hemenway, 54), and anthropology offered her a scientific way to record the cultural and intellectual richness of this art form. When one of the Eatonville residents asked, "Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?" Hurston replied that an audience did indeed exist and that she wanted to record the tales before "everybody forgets all of 'em." Hurston understood the importance of preserving the tales, and anthropology provided a structure for recording the folklore, "a pattern of meaning for material that white racism consistently distorted into stereotypes." (Hemenway, 215) Her work as an anthropologist and as a creative writer clearly overlapped; the folklore she collected fueled her fiction and provided her with a unique perspective and original material.

In spite of her training as an anthropologist, Hurston was never a conventional scientist, as demonstrated in the untraditional narrative structure of *Mules and Men*, an intimate portrait of African-American communities in the South, and Hurston's own connection to these communities. Brimming with folktales, songs, sermons, hoodoo, jokes, and tall tales or "lies," *Mules and Men* celebrates rural African-American folklore, and it is the first of several of Hurston's books to explore this theme.

Some of the most lively sections in both *Mules and Men* and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, concern Polk County, a sawmill and railroad town near the Everglades "where they really lies up a mess and dats where dey make up all de songs and things lak dat." In these works, she collects tales about "Ole Massa" and John, the slave who outwits him, and records the local folk songs, thereby capturing the spirit and attitudes of the place: "Polk County. After dark, the jooks. Songs are born out of feelings with an old beat-up piano, or a guitar for a mid-wife. Love made and unmade. Who put out dat lie, it was supposed to last forever?" Hurston explores the roots of community, where "the impulse is not to isolate oneself, but to lose the self in the art and wisdom of the group." (Hemenway, 166) This theme would appear throughout her career, in her stories, plays, and novels.

Over the years Hurston explored the hidden rural communities of Florida, New Orleans, and the Caribbean. *Tell My Horse*, a book of folklore based on her observations of voodoo in Haiti, was written three years after the publication of *Mules and Men*, but did not sell well; her biographer calls it her "poorest book," for the reason that Hurston was a "novelist and folklorist, not a political analyst or traveloguist." (Hemenway, 249).

On the other hand, *Mules and Men* succeeds because of its unique focus on not only Southern black communities but also Hurston's involvement with them. It is not a traditional anthropological report: rather than providing a detached, impersonal account of an "other" culture, Hurston depicts herself as a central character—the book opens with Hurston's trip back to her hometown, one of her earliest sources of folklore, and the humor, songs, chants, jokes, and sermons in *Mules and Men* document her own experiences as well as the community's.

**Black Communities**

Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town to be incorporated in America. Hurston described Eatonville as "a pure Negro" town, in which segregation was not an issue because only African-Americans lived in and ran the town. This area, rich with guava and orange trees, first gave Hurston her sense of self and also provided her with the inspiration for many stories and the characters that would appear in her fiction. Hurston blended her experiences in Eatonville and the subject of black folklore in her work in order to establish themes of African-American autonomy and culture.

Eatonville figures in much of her fiction and appears in Hurston's "Eatonville Anthology," a series of short stories published in the *Messenger* in 1926, and her first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). Both works demonstrate her ear for dialect and her attraction to black folklore. Based on the lives of her own parents, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* follows the life of John Pearson, a physically strong, well-liked, womanizing preacher who moves his family to this unusual town. When he first hears of Eatonville, John is awestruck at the idea of an African-American town:

'You mean uh whole town uh nothin' but colored folks? Who bosses it, den?'  
'Dey bosses it deyself.'  
'You mean dey runnin' de town 'thout de white folks?'

Upon arrival in Eatonville, John's wife Lucy immediately feels connected to the African-American town: "Lucy sniffed sweet air laden with night-blooming jasmine and wished that she had been born in this climate. She seemed to herself to be coming home. This was where she was meant to be." For Hurston's characters, Eatonville is the land of promise and opportunity.

Eatonville's prominence in Hurston's work highlights her belief in the power of African-American communities that are self-run, without any dependence on social, cultural, political, and economic systems dominated by whites. Therefore the focus of most of her fiction is on the African-American townsfolk that populate such places as Eatonville, rather than on racial tensions between African-Americans and whites.

Three years after *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was published, Eatonville reappeared in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's most accomplished and widely read work. The townspeople, filled with wit and wisdom, play an important role in the novel's setting and narrative. Soon-to-be mayor Joe Starks glorifies the significance of the town: "But when he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he came from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place data colored folks was buildin' theirselves." Again, Hurston favored African-Americans sustaining and governing themselves without interference from white society, but reviewers often interpreted Hurston's lack of confrontation between African-Americans and whites in her writing as proof that she was ignoring racism.

For example, *Mules and Men* received mostly positive reviews until Sterling Brown criticized the book, claiming the stories "should be more bitter," and saying that they did not reflect the harsh racism in America, especially in the South. Brown's view represents the type of criticism that followed Hurston throughout her career, and perhaps contributed to her more conservative politics in the later part of her life.

Hurston, fiercely independent, expressed resentment of what she termed the "sobbing school of Negrohood" in her somewhat controversial essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." She also did not write about tragic African-American characters. "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem," she complains in her autobiography. "I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color." But Hurston could give contradictory viewpoints or express brash sentiments about race, as demonstrated in the same essay, when she dismisses slavery as "the price I paid for civilization."

In their dismissal of Hurston's politics, many critics wrongly simplified her fiction, often ignoring the progressive nature of her focus on African-American communities and strong African-American female characters. In reviewing*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, author Richard Wright claimed the novel was not "serious fiction," and that Hurston's novel followed in the tradition of "the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh," and Alain Locke wondered when Hurston would "come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction." Hurston shot back that Wright's work was not an African-American novel but "a treatise on sociology."

Hurston's views of race can be attributed to her strong belief in individuality. Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains in his afterword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that Hurston railed against "the idea that racism has reduced black people to mere ciphers, to beings who only react to an omnipresent racial oppression."

Though her comments on racism in her fiction are often subtle, she certainly did not ignore the subject. For example, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, after a hurricane destroys the town, the white officials order that the white corpses be buried in coffins, while the African-American corpses be left to rot: "And don't lemme ketch none uh y'all dumpin' white folks, and don't be wastin' no boxes on colored." Furthermore, Hurston often spoke to the complexities of racism within the African-American community. For example, Mrs. Turner, an African-American character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, only befriends Janie because she is mulatto, claiming, "We oughta lighten up de race." While Hurston's main focus did not concern the racism of society, she did not belittle the subject.

Hurston's fiction portrayed African-American culture without defining it in relation to dominant white culture. 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."(Wall, 77) By writing of viable working-class African-American communities that were financially and culturally independent of whites, Hurston put forth her view that African-Americans could rise above the racist society by creating their own communities, not by imitating or hoping to "rise" to white society. Far from "quaint," Hurston's folklore and fiction is poignant in its portrayal of the "common people" who were not concerned with moving up into the white world, but were creating their own art and poetry and stories from the depths of their own heritage.

**The Poetry and Symbolism of Hurston's Language**

The richness and layers in black folklore influenced nearly all of Hurston's writing, not only in terms of subject but also style. For example, Hurston has been criticized for making up parts of her life and deleting other parts in her autobiography, but this is the exaggerated and hyperbolic style of folktales and "lies" that makes it unique. Hurston claims a hog taught her how to take her first steps: "They tell me that an old sow-hog taught me how to walk. That is, she didn't instruct me in detail, but she convinced me that I really ought to try." It is when her writing displays such playfulness that Hurston's work feels the most intimate. The style of her best writing showcases metaphors, imagery, and allegories that draw the reader into a rich, vibrant world; it is the kind of language Hurston claimed was part of the African-American tradition, the "will to adorn." By both writing about this mode of language and using it herself in her writing, she was continuing the tradition.

Because Hurston brought black folklore and rhetorical styles into her fiction, her work embraced lyric symbolism and rhythmic diction. Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, provides Hurston with a space in which to depict folklore and African-American expression. The characters often speak in idioms, such as "A'll give mah case to Miss Bush and let Mother Green stand mah bond" or "God don't eat okra." Hurston also includes full-length passages of John's sermons as a way to represent the poetry of the preacher. Although there are many admirable aspects of the novel, it is often criticized for its undeveloped characters and the pages of folklore that sometimes overwhelm the narrative. The Southern diction at times feels forced within the narrative, reflecting the tension between Hurston's dual identities of anthropologist and novelist.

Hurston mastered this style three years later in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which she wrote in Haiti in only seven weeks, feeling as though the story "was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure." The fictional romance with Tea Cake was based on Hurston's true life romance with a Columbia student; as she explains, "The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him." Her language captures the range of spoken African-American voices—the witticisms, stories, jokes—within the text. Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls this novel an example of the "speakerly text," a written work that represents an oral literary tradition. Using this innovative style, Hurston could "represent various traditional modes of Afro-American rhetorical plots while simultaneously representing her protagonists' growth in self-consciousness through free indirect discourse." (Gates, 175)

The novel opens with a distant third person narrator, speaking in a storyteller voice, who sets up the novel's story-within-a-story structure by describing the heroine Janie Crawford as a woman who "had come back from burying the dead." The narrative then moves into the dialogue between Janie and her friend Pheoby with "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story." The idea that the reader is "overhearing" Janie's story prevails, even though the story is not presented in first person but in a third person narrative voice that embodies the rich, intimate African-American dialect. Unlike Hurston's first novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* uses this narrative technique to advance the plot and develop memorable and moving characters.

Hurston's language moves effortlessly from a third person narrative voice to the dialectical, metaphor-rich language of the characters, and through these fluid shifts of language, Gates claims Hurston has found a third term, or a new way of telling. He describes the two narrative poles as the African-American oral tradition and the standard English literary tradition and states that "The quandary for the writer was to find a third term, a bold and novel signifier, informed by these two related yet distinct literary languages. This is what Hurston tried to do in *Their Eyes*." (Gates, 158). There are places in the text in which the narrative voice blends standard English and African-American dialect, portraying the world through Janie's eyes. When the men are at the store telling "lies," the narrative interrupts their dialogue: "But here come Bootsie, and Teadi and Big 'oman down the street making out they are pretty by the way they walk. They have got that fresh, new taste about them like young mustard greens in the spring, and the young men on the porch are just bound to tell them about it and buy them some treats."

Hurston does not focus solely on Janie, but expands the narrative scope to include the stories of minor characters, namely the men who sit and tell stories on the porch of Joe Starks's store. The play of African-American language, the "lies," and the idea of rhetorically showing off or "signifying," is best demonstrated here; these stories-within-stories exhibit the play of double-speak, intricate metaphors, and tropes of vernacular African-American language. The porch is also an important symbol of Hurston's childhood, the place that was "the heart and spring of the town."

Gates notes that the novel's narrative is presented "through several subtexts or embedded narratives presented as the characters' discourse, of traditional black rhetorical games or rituals. It is the text's imitation of these examples of traditionally black rhetorical rituals and modes of storytelling that allows us to think of it as a speakerly text." (Gates, 178) The characters on the store porch often try to outdo each other in the colorfulness and exaggeration of their stories, performing the language for each other.

Hurston provides an example of the way she learned to speak in her autobiography, claiming that Southern children are "raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names ... They can tell you in simile exactly how you walk and smell. They can furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like. What ought to happen to you is full of images and flavor." This image-laden prose brings vibrancy to her words and intimacy to her descriptions. For example, when describing the death of her mother in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she writes: "The Master-Maker in His making had made Old Death. Made him with big, soft feet and square toes. Made him with a face that reflects the face of all things, but neither changes itself, nor is mirrored anywhere." In describing her family's poverty she writes: "There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet ... People can be slave-ships in shoes."

In the article "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Hurston describes the African-American way of speech as using "action words," providing examples such as "'chop-axe,' 'sitting-chair,' 'cook-pot' and the like" and she continues to explain the concept: "Everything illustrated. So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics." She expresses this idea in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to."

This picture style of language appears not only in Hurston's lyricism and in her characters' dialogue, but also in the symbolism of her work. A train, embodying movement, power, and male sexuality, is described as a "panting monster," frightening and impressing John Pearson when he first sees it in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Later, he does not want to go back to live with his family on the other side of the creek but wants to live "where the train came puffing into the depot twice a day." Ironically, in the end it is the train that kills John.

Hurston's mastery of her symbolic language is most evident in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A repeating image, one that also appears in her autobiography, is a tree, specifically a flowering pear tree. The tree first appears at the moment of Janie's sexual awakening, a moment when Janie is inside herself and understands what she wants: "She was stretched out on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her." This is the moment when Janie believes she has reached her full "conscious life." Her grandmother, who forces her to marry Logan Killicks, represents what Janie does not want to become: "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm" and the "vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree." Many years later, after two unsuccessful and oppressive marriages, Janie falls in love with Tea Cake, and here the image of the flowering pear tree returns: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring."

Similarly, in an early short story, "Sweat," Delia, enduring the abuse and torment of her husband, realizes that love has disappeared from their marriage, understanding that "[a]nything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart" and she finds the only peace in her life is her home: "She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely."

**Autonomy and Voice: A Woman's Search**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not only noteworthy for its language, but also for the strength of its protagonist, a black woman who reaches empowerment and self-autonomy. The African-American and feminist movements incited the renaissance of Hurston, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is often taught as a feminist text, a story about a woman's search for identity and self-reliance.

Janie Crawford, the heroine of the novel, is a fully realized character who discovers her independence through language and through the intimate relationships with the people in her life. After Janie discovers her sexuality under the pear tree, Nanny attempts to thwart what she considers a vulnerability, and she forces Janie to marry the old man Logan Killicks. In Nanny's eyes, Killicks, a property owner, will provide Janie with protection and material goods. Nanny, who was born under slavery, believes "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." When Joe Starks comes along, he offers Janie an escape and lures her with tales of an all-black town. Although Janie hesitates ("Janie pulled back a long time because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees"), she decides to flee with Starks: "A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her."

Starks soon becomes the store owner and mayor of Eatonville, creating roads, adding lamp posts, and living in a house so large, "the rest of the town looked like servants' quarters," an image that likens Starks's power over the town and Janie to that of a slave owner. Starks flexes his power early in the novel when the townspeople ask Janie to provide words of encouragement about her husband the mayor. Starks interrupts with, "Mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's us woman and her place is in de home." Janie would like to indulge in the story telling, but Starks has forbidden her to participate, even though the other men consider Janie "uh born orator ... Us never knowed dat befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts."

In a culture steeped in oral tradition, Joe has silenced Janie; she is a listener, not a participant. Starks insists that the store porch, colored with its stories and tales, remain a male-gendered space and thereby suppresses Janie's subjectivity. Janie immediately realizes what he has taken from her: "Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things ... she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold." Starks' favorite expression is "I god," a constant reminder of the almighty position he sees himself occupying.

The ability to manipulate language is a constant theme in Hurston's work. For example, in the later novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, God, often referred to as "the Voice," speaks to the hero Moses, providing this man with a "stammering tongue" that grants him the power to lead the people. Similarly, John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* finds his power in voice through preaching, his words able to move and motivate the people. When John realizes that he can preach the word upon finding his voice, his language becomes more poetic and charged. He hears himself pray and exclaims: "If mah voice sound *dat* good de first time Ah ever prayed in de church house, it sho won't be de las."

John may be the man of words, but it is his wife Lucy who is the voice of truth. Although she has no platform from which to speak, as he does, her words are used to cut through his masculinity. When John tests her, asking her if she wished she had married a richer man, she answers, "If you tired uh me, ju' leave me. Another man over de fence waitin fuh yo' job." Her words threaten John, and he in turn threatens "tuh kill yuh jes' ez sho ez gun is iron." Lucy is the voice of encouragement and belief in John, but he refuses to listen, thus disempowering her.

Hurston shows speaking as something usually relegated to men. In her autobiography, she depicts the porch as a gathering place for men, though she often lingers to hear them talk. One of the only women who participates is Big Sweet of Polk County, who appears in *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a woman who clearly inspired Hurston with her strength, independence, and her keen ability to manipulate language. When Hurston first comes into contact with Big Sweet, she is "specifyin'" or rhetorically showing off.

Wall emphasizes the importance of this character: "It was Big Sweet's talk though that first captured Hurston's attention. Her words were emblematic of her power, for they signaled her ownership of self ... Hurston believed that individual black women could base their personal autonomy on communal traditions. In doing so, her characters achieved their status as heroines." (Wall, 83–84) Big Sweet enters the male-dominated space through her voice, and eventually Janie will follow in this direction.

Although many of the male characters are big talkers, they are also lacking an understanding of their selves, of the interior, such as John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, who seems mystified at the way his life has turned out. Similarly, for Joe Starks, language is only a game or power play, while Janie reaches an understanding of the self, in part by learning the power of voice—both by speaking and by resisting speech.

After Joe berates her in the store, she "pressed her teeth together and learned to hush." She divorces herself psychologically from him: "She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them." She waits until Starks has grown old and then she speaks back to him in the store, in a significant scene that, Gates argues, rhetorically "kills" Starks. After Joe insults her, she "took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before." She tells Starks: "You big-bellies around here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo big voice. Humphy! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." This scene depicts the power Janie has won through words: "Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible."

Following this scene, Joe becomes sick with kidney failure and finally dies, and Janie discovers freedom. Thus, Janie's use of her voice begins to lead her on the trail of self-discovery. This scene echoes the moment in "Sweat" when Delia, fed up with Syke's insults, finally stands up to him and speaks the truth: "Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh ... Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog."

In Hurston's work, voice is important not only as a means of power, but as a way to carry on memories and stories. Memory affected Hurston's ventures into anthropology and fiction, with her memories of Joe Clark's store and the folktales that inspired her throughout her career. As an anthropologist, she had the opportunity to preserve the culture that had always been dear to her. In her writing, the alliance of memory and voice often concerns the relationships of women.

When Hurston's mother dies, she realizes her mother, "depended on me for a voice" (Hurston, 65). Her mother impacted Hurston's individuality and creativity, urging her daughter to "jump at de sun," and Hurston hoped to recapture her mother's life in her first novel. Thus, on her deathbed, Lucy reveals the secret of happiness to her daughter: "Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self," the advice moving from mother to daughter, contained in a female sphere.

Significantly, the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* suggests "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly." The narrative operates on the structure of Janie *telling* her story to her friend Pheoby, claiming "muh mouf is in my friend's mouf." Unlike the men on the porch who try to outdo each other's "lies," constantly interrupting and arguing with each other, Janie and Pheoby have a dialogue based on truth-telling and true listening. By the end of Janie's tale and tale-within-tales, Pheoby has been changed: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie." So that not only has Janie reached self-autonomy, but Pheoby, just by listening, has been affected, and perhaps has a better realization of love and what it means to be a woman.

When Janie meets Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods, who, unlike her first two husbands, Killicks and Starks, has no possessions or wealth, he invites her to play a game of checkers with him, something that Starks had never allowed, and Janie "found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody though it natural for her to play." Tea Cake with all his charm and playfulness represents a chance for equality between men and women, and although their relationship does not fully reach this balance, it is certainly the fullest, most loving relationship for Janie. Not only does she come to realize that love "is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore," Janie also progresses into independence. Tea Cake asks Janie if she wants to "partake wid everything," and she says she does, and when they go to work on the farms in the Everglades, "the muck," they share household chores and spend their nights with the community, singing, dancing, and telling stories. Here, unlike Joe Starks' store, Janie has found a voice: "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."

After Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and, crazed, tries to kill Janie, she shoots him in self-defense. Afterward, Janie is ostracized by her peers, namely the men in the community, but she is strong enough to withstand their criticisms, and returns, filled with mourning, to Eatonville, where she finds a place for herself in the world—as an independent woman. She has reached the point of understanding where she will not live the way her grandmother expected, but her own way. She has shown that African-American women are not the "mules" of the world. 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 around her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her," but Janie realizes the fullness and opportunity of the horizon, and she "had found the jewel down inside herself."

By the end of the novel she realizes her love for Tea Cake has not died, and that his "memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace." Thus, Janie understands her autonomous and fully conscious self, and the spirit of the Eatonville community is as important to the novel as Janie's self-discoveries. Wall posits that Hurston "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. Although that culture was in some respects sexist, black women, like black men, attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it." (Wall, 77)

While Hurston charted an African-American woman's journey toward autonomy in*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, most of the other Harlem Renaissance writers were documenting the stories of male protagonists; thus, Hurston dismantled and critiqued the very aspects of African-American male culture that others were working so hard to uphold. Now, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is celebrated by critics as a feminist and African-American text. "Hurston was not the first Afro-American woman to publish a novel, but she was the first to create language and imagery that reflected the reality of black women's lives," asserts Wall.

Hurston's affirmation of African-American women and African-American culture has influenced such contemporary writers as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor. In her foreword to Hemenway's biography, Walker opens with the line, "I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston's work some time before I knew her work existed," exemplifying the importance of Hurston's writing. Examples of strong female characters can be found in Hurston's other texts, but it is clearly the novel that best withstands scrutiny.

**Politics**

Hurston's next novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), blends the biblical story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt with African-American folklore, and although critics consider this to be a highly ambitious novel, perhaps Hurston's most ambitious, the novel has not received the same scholarly focus, namely because the book fails in the respect that "its author could not maintain the fusion of black creative style, biblical tone, ethnic humor, and legendary reference that periodically appears." (Hemenway, 270) While the novel often draws on previous themes of the power of language, identity, and African-American folklore, it takes place in Egypt rather than the rural South.

The novel retells the story of Moses, with his "true" identity, that of Egyptian or Hebrew, never fully revealed. Instead Hurston focuses on the legends and myth-making stories that help to develop Moses, and then follows his own personal quest for identity as the leader of a people and a chosen man who can speak directly with God. As in her other work, Hurston explores African-American folklore, drawing on her anthropological research, and portrays Moses as a powerful hoodoo man.

Interestingly, when Moses, who is raised in the high court of Egypt, departs to Midean, he learns "the dialect of [the] people," and his power as a man of nature and hoodoo begins to evolve. He begins to speak in the rural black dialect reminiscent of Hurston's Eatonville cast, to "reinforce Moses' human qualities," and his vivid speech resembles the poetry of preacher John Pearson. The black dialect supplants the traditional rhetoric of the Bible, and although the tone is not always consistent, this unique element provides an example of one of the ways in which the novel addresses race.

In this novel, Hurston embarks on more politically influenced themes. With the differing views on Moses's "true" birthright, Hurston alludes to the idea of passing, and in one particularly moving passage, after Moses has left Egypt, she writes of this change: "Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over."

The novel is a blend of serious and comic tone; Hurston satirizes both the bickering that goes on among the leaders and the slaves' reluctance to follow Moses, the latter serving as a commentary on the transition from slavery to freedom for black Americans. Thus, the novel is not a satire, but a serious exploration of emancipation, depicting the complexities of reaching freedom after years of bondage. Moses realizes "He had found out that no many may make another free. Freedom was something internal ... All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation."

Although Hurston focuses on freedom, in many ways this freedom is relegated only to men. Unlike *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, women are secondary characters in this novel, without voice or individuality. Her next novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published nine years later, focuses on a woman protagonist, but one who does not reach the kind of self-realization that Janie discovered.

During the interim between *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston published essays and her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). The autobiography was her most commercially successful book, and Hemenway believes part of this success is because the book "did not offend whites." Hurston was often criticized for playing to white sympathies, and the complexity of this issue is most apparent in her autobiography, which Alice Walker calls the most "unfortunate" book that Hurston published. Often the book seems to evade truth, and some sections, such as the descriptions of her patrons or the white man who helped birth her, seem excessive in their attempt to depict the goodness of whites. However, in defense of Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* was Hurston's most heavily edited book, and her publisher insisted that some of the more politically controversial sections be cut entirely.

Refuting criticism that the book is evasive, critic Deborah Platt calls the autobiography "a discourse of resistance" in which Hurston "constructs a mytho-narrative wherein the persona created transcends the oppressive conditions of society and holds power over self and world" (Platt, 9, 11). In other words, although the autobiography shies away from issues of racism in the South, often to a point of criticism, it is clear that these aspects of society must have penetrated Hurston's life in some way; she controls the narrative by choosing what to share with the reader, in order to again create this self-sustained African-American community.

"That which she chooses to reveal is the life of her imagination, as it sought to mold and interpret her environment," states Gates in the afterword. "That which she silences or deletes, similarly, is all that her readership would draw upon to delimit or pigeonhole her life as a synecdoche of 'the race problem,' an exceptional part standing for the debased whole." The freedom of imagination for Hurston appears thematically in much of her work, and her autobiography is not necessarily avoiding issues, but embracing the creativity of memory and imagination.

Perhaps one influence on the tone of Hurston's autobiography is the place and circumstances in which she wrote it—she wrote the book while living in California at the home of a wealthy white woman, Katherine Mershon; similar to her situation at the start of her career, Hurston was again dependent on white patronage. Clearly, Hurston's relationship with her patrons could affect her work.

The most significant period of funding occurred early in her career, when Mrs. Charlotte R. Osgood Mason, or "Godmother," as she instructed Hurston to call her, funded Hurston as she collected folklore. Hurston gave up much of her own power to Mason, who for a short time was also Langston Hughes' patron. During the five years Hurston was collecting folklore for *Mules and Men*, Mason forbid Hurston to publish, and everything she collected was considered Mason's property. Hurston devotes a short section of *Dust Tracks on a Road* to describing her relationship with her white patron, fawning over her generosity, but the astute reader can glimpse the power structure of this relationship as Mason instructs Hurston, "Keep silent. Does a child in the womb speak?" (Hurston, 144).

Critic Barbara Johnson notes, "Hurston's joyful and lucrative gatepost stance between black and white cultures was very much a part of her Harlem Renaissance persona and indeed was often deplored by fellow black artists." However, this kind of relationship was not restricted to Hurston; many of the African-American artists were funded by white patrons during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's financial dependency on Mason complicated Hurston's position as a creative writer, and clearly some of Hurston's best work was produced in the periods where she was *not* reliant on her patrons.

While she may have been grateful for funding, Hurston understood the position of the African-American artist. Her evocative essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950), grasps the racism inherent in the publishing industry and in society: "I have been amazed by the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes, and for that matter, any non-Anglo-Saxon peoples within our borders, above the class of unskilled labor."

Hurston was often targeted for intentionally appealing to a white audience. Langston Hughes, once a friend of Hurston, later wrote about her in his autobiography: "To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie.'" However, such criticisms simplify and undercut Hurston's dedication to her African-American roots, and her clear and strong views on the racism in America. Her essays, "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience" (1944), and "Crazy for this Democracy" (1945), lambast the Jim Crow laws, and call for their complete repeal. She writes that in America "no one of darker skin can ever be considered an equal" and asserts that she will "give my hand, my heart and my head to the total struggle."

In the fifties her views grew more conservative, with her fear of Communism and her distrust of liberal Northerners fueling her politics. Her statements during this period have overshadowed her more radical and progressive views. In a 1955 letter published in the *Orlando Sentinel*, she objected to the Supreme Court's desegregation decision, and this brought much warranted criticism against her. However, it must also be understood that Hurston, who had been raised in an all-black town, feared that all African-American institutions were to be integrated with whites so that the students could be "introduced" to a "higher" way of learning.

The criticism of Hurston catering to white audiences also arises with her next and final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). The book is considered a failure by most critics, despite receiving mostly good reviews and selling well at the time of publication, albeit mostly to whites. It is her only novel where the central characters are white. Arvay Henson Meserve's life is constructed through her marriage to Jim Meserve, a sexist and oppressive man similar to Joe Starks. However, Arvay never reaches the autonomy or independence that Janie does, possible because she is "not given a stature that will support the psychological burden she is asked to bear." (Hemenway, 310)

Although all of the central characters are white, they often speak like the characters of Eatonville, as if the African-American folklore can be erased of its culture, and so the dialogue seems out of context. Most critics agree that the main problem with this novel is that Hurston abandoned the source of her creativity, forsaking her love of African-American folklore and thus her creative inspiration.

In the last decade of her life, Hurston lived by herself in Florida and worked on a book about Herod the Great. Although during this time she had health problems and struggled financially, she was no longer dependent on patrons, and she was writing as much as she physically could.

The rediscovery of Hurston and her importance as an African-American, female writer has spawned her full revival, finally placing Hurston alongside other accomplished writers. With Hurston's anthropological field work in African-American folklore and her blend of Southern diction and poetic symbolism, she produced a unique, admirable oeuvre. Her characters succeed with their voices, overcoming dominating attitudes of sexism and racism in society; thus, Hurston's work uplifts the importance of female identity and independence, while also affirming and celebrating African-American culture.

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#### *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 1937  
**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston  
**From:** *The American Novel*, Understanding Literature through Close Reading.

Zora Neale Hurston's most famous novel focuses on the life and relationships of Janie Crawford, who enters the book just as the events described in most of the text have ended. A light-skinned African-American woman who seems youthful despite the fact that she is now in her 40s, Janie returns to the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where her second husband was once the most prominent businessman and then the mayor. After that husband died, Janie took up with a much younger man; as she now returns to the town, that man is dead and the judgmental townspeople are curious to learn what has happened. A friend of Janie's, Pheoby Watson, visits her and hears the story of Janie's life.

As a little girl, Janie was raised by Nanny (her grandmother and an ex-slave) after Janie's mother ran off. Nanny was loving but was also strict and forceful; she wanted Janie to avoid the mistakes Janie's mother had made. When Janie started to become interested in boys, Nanny decided to marry her off to an old farmer named Logan Killicks, who could provide the girl with economic security. After Nanny's death, Janie's relations with Killicks become more and more strained. Eventually, she becomes involved with an ambitious man named Joe Starks, who happens to pass by the Killicks farm on his way to the new all-black town of Eatonville, which has just begun to form. Although he is 17 years older than Janie, he is full of vigor and big plans. Before long, Janie and Starks run off together and quickly get married. At first Joe—whom she calls "Jody"—treats her well and their lives prosper. Joe opens a store in Eatonville, and he soon becomes mayor. As the town grows and the store becomes more and more successful, Joe builds a large house, but his relations with Janie begin to deteriorate as he becomes increasingly critical and domineering. Eventually Janie loses much of her enthusiasm for life and much of her respect for Joe; the longer they are married, the more abusive he becomes, until at one point Janie embarrasses him in front of his friends by insulting his manhood. As Joe's health deteriorates, Janie tries to talk to him honestly before he dies, but he refuses to listen. After his death, Janie continues to operate the store as she contemplates her future.

Her life takes a sudden turn toward happiness when a handsome young man named Vergible Woods (otherwise known as Tea Cake) enters the store one day. He is 12 years younger than she, but the two feel an instant bond. He reignites her passion for life and love, and before long, she runs off and joins him in Jacksonville, where they quickly marry. Although Tea Cake is a fun-loving spendthrift who once takes some of Janie's money, he is also a lucky gambler and a man who knows how to enjoy himself and bring joy to others. He and Janie soon head for the Everglades, where they live a very simple, happy-go-lucky existence while working in the fields with a crowd of other black workers. Although jealousies and other tensions sometimes enter their lives, Janie and Tea Cake are basically very happy—until, that is, a gigantic hurricane descends on their area, flooding the fields and causing massive death and destruction. As he tries to cope with the flood, Tea Cake is bitten by an angry dog, and although he and Janie manage to survive, their old way of life is destroyed. Eventually, it becomes clear that Tea Cake has been infected with rabies, and before long, he begins to lose his mind. When he one day attempts to attack Janie, she feels forced to shoot him, and although he dies, he manages to bite her during the struggle. Tried but acquitted by an all-white jury, Janie buries Tea Cake and then returns to Eatonville, where she tells her story to Pheoby and takes joy in her memories of the life she and Tea Cake shared.

## Janie First Appears

### Context

In the following passage, which opens the novel, Hurston first provides a brief two-paragraph prologue and then offers the first description of Janie, the central character, as she returns after an extended absence to the all-black town in which she spent many years of her life with her second husband, now deceased.

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.  
Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.  
So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.  
The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.  
Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

### Analysis

Hurston's novel opens with a sentence that seems at first to apply to all human beings; only as the first two paragraphs develop does the narrator begin to make distinctions, particularly between men and women. Indeed, despite Hurston's status as a major African-American novelist, differences between the sexes seem far more important in this two-paragraph prologue (and throughout the novel as a whole) than differences between races. In any case, the narrator begins with a statement that sounds (like much of the language of this text) almost proverbial and that might apply to anyone, and in fact, Hurston's book tends to deal with basic, archetypal human experiences and concerns, including the discovery of sexual desire, the yearning for love, the striving for independence, relations with one's community, and the need to find a voice of one's own. The book's language at first is clear, simple, and straightforward; only later will it become more obviously complex, lyrical, and inflected with regional and racial dialect. Already implicit in the opening sentence is a concern with the horizon, which is one of the major images of the entire novel, and indeed the word *horizon* (and everything that it symbolizes) is introduced explicitly in the third sentence. This is a book that will deal with fundamental human dreams and aspirations—with the desire to travel and to explore and to learn—and the symbol of the horizon will return again and again as a leitmotif throughout the text. Nevertheless, for all its emphasis on romantic yearnings (in every sense of that adjective), Hurston's novel will not be naive or sentimental or saccharine; it will acknowledge and depict the destructive impact of such forces as death and time; it will show some dreams fulfilled but many others mocked; it will deal with human aspirations as well as with human limits; and the tone of the book will sometimes be one of joy but sometimes also one of resignation. The first few sentences of the novel thus foreshadow much that is to come not only in terms of imagery and symbolism but also in terms of themes and plot and mood.

Already in these opening sentences, Hurston begins to reveal her mastery of various sophisticated rhetorical skills. She knows, for instance, how to juxtapose long sentences with sentences that are effectively brief ("That is the life of men"; "The dream is the truth"). She knows how to employ balanced syntax, such as the device called chiasmus ("Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget"). She knows how to repeat basic sentence structures in order to emphasize key distinctions ("For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon"). And, in one of her most commonly employed devices, she shows repeatedly that she knows how to use personification (as in the reference to "Time") in order to suggest that in this book the entire universe is alive and meaningful and rich with human significance. Although Hurston wrote during the hey-day of literary modernism, she often writes as if she is a premodern bard, a spinner of legends and folktales, a poet of myths and fables. The opening sentences of the novel quickly establish a tone of confident assertion, of access to basic human truths, and of insight into basic human traits. The narrator of the novel immediately employs a voice that implies profound wisdom and mature intelligence.

Paradoxically, the beginning of the narration itself (after the two-paragraph prologue) emphasizes death. The opening of the novel thus foreshadows its conclusion, and when we meet the main character for the first time, she is returning home from all the experiences the novel will now begin to recount. The text thus already has a circular structure, and Hurston goes out of her way here at the opening to emphasize the grimmest aspects of the protagonist's life, including her recent involvement with gruesome dead bodies, "sodden" and "bloated," "the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment." This will often be a beautiful, lyrical novel and will celebrate the discovery of genuine love and passion, but the book—despite its mythic aspects—will not be a simple, romantic fairy tale. Hurston makes that fact clear from the start, just as she is also careful to emphasize almost immediately the key theme of "judgment," especially the judgments rendered by members of one's community. These are people who can be envious even though they may also be hardworking and who can be cruel even though they may be oppressed or underprivileged. Here and throughout the novel, Hurston reveals the moral and psychological complexities of practically all the characters she presents. She refuses to simplify or sentimentalize; the people she depicts are neither entirely saintly nor entirely malevolent, no matter what their color, class, or sex. Even Janie herself—the protagonist who is here presented as a victim of "mass cruelty"—will not be flawless. The book opens by sounding many of its key themes, by presenting many of its key images and symbols, and by already implying complexity both within and among individuals and the communities with whom those individuals are involved.

## Janie and the Pear Tree

### Context

In the following passage, which occurs about halfway through chapter 1, 16-year-old Janie experiences a psychological and sexual awakening as she lies on the ground and watches bees pollinate a pear tree on her grandmother's property.

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.  
After a while she got up from where she was and went over the little garden field entire. She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How? She found herself at the kitchen door and stumbled inside. In the air of the room were flies tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage. When she reached the narrow hallway she was reminded that her grandmother was home with a sick headache. She was lying across the bed asleep so Janie tipped on out of the front door. Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made.

### Analysis

This passage, like so much of the novel, focuses on the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of Janie. The fact that she is described at the beginning of the passage as "stretched on her back" on the ground beneath a "pear tree" is both significant and ironic. She begins the passage in a posture associated with comfort and relaxation, and yet, by the end of this segment, she will feel simultaneously full of arousal, desire, dissatisfaction, discomfort, and pleasure. Her physical position, along with her age (16), already implies sexual possibilities, while the fact that she lies on the earth and that she is staring up into a pear tree (often used as a symbol of sexuality in both medieval and modern literature) not only puts her in literal contact with nature but also enhances the erotic potential of the passage. That potential then becomes almost blatantly obvious when Hurston next describes the way the bees pollinate the flowers of the tree. As so often in this novel, nature is personified: The bees give off an "alto chant," the breeze has a "panting breath," and the whole milieu achieves a kind of paradoxically "inaudible voice." Nature, in Hurston's text, rarely seems alien or remote; it nearly always seems almost human, and nowhere is this fact clearer than in the present passage. When the "dust-bearing bee" sinks (with effective alliteration) "into the sanctum of a bloom," Hurston describes a kind of sexual intercourse that seems almost sacred and holy. And, when the "thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace," sending an "ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch" so that they seem to be "creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight," the imagery is positively orgasmic. Even though she supposedly is simply describing the pollination of a tree, Hurston's allusive language seems surprisingly and boldly explicit, especially in a work by an African-American woman writer of the 1930s. This was risky writing for a woman of her race and era. Yet, here as so often elsewhere in this book, sexuality is celebrated rather than censored, exalted rather than concealed.

Janie's unspoken reaction—"So this was marriage!"—seems charmingly naive, but it also seems meaningful in ways she herself may not suspect. If marriage is a sexual relationship sanctioned by God, then the intercourse of pollen and flower may indeed be a kind of marriage. In any case, the religious language continues when Hurston writes that Janie "had been summoned to behold a revelation." She experiences a sort of personal epiphany, one that is full of private meaning and significance, and its impact on her is itself almost orgasmic: She feels a paradoxical "pain remorseless sweet" that leaves her "limp and languid," as Hurston once more resorts to lyrical alliteration and ignores the standard rules of grammar (by writing "remorseless sweet" rather than "remorselessly sweet"). She thus conveys the special nature of Janie's experience. There is, perhaps, even the possibility that Janie has quite literally experienced an orgasm here; in any case, the language is definitely (and defiantly) sexual.

The fact that Janie experiences this revelation in a garden beneath a tree cannot help but recall the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, and there is no denying that Janie comes into a new kind of knowledge after having watched the bees entering the flowers. Yet, there seems nothing sinful (at least in her eyes) about this "revelation," and rather than feeling ashamed of her new perceptions, she goes "seeking confirmation" of this new "voice and vision," a characteristically alliterative phrase that is also typical of this novel's tendency to describe knowledge as if it were a sensual experience. Janie is a seeker here and throughout the text. However, although the "confirmation" she finds seems at first a "personal answer," the sentence then continues: It is a personal answer "for all other creations except herself." The universe seems alive with lovemaking (even the "marrying" flies are made to seem appealingly erotic), but Janie feels excluded from all the "tumbling" and the "singing" and the "giving in marriage." Inside the constricting, "narrow" confines of her grandmother's home, inside the safely domestic and traditionally female space of the kitchen, she suddenly feels remote from the beautiful sexuality of the bees and the pear tree, and when she sees her old grandmother, "with a sick headache," sleeping on the bed, the symbolic contrast between Janie's youthful erotic vigor and her grandmother's aged, weary, and afflicted body could hardly be stronger. So, Janie returns to the outdoors, the place associated with nature, sexuality, and vigor, and the ideal harmony between humans and nature is once again implied when Hurston describes the bees as if they were people (the "kissing bees singing") and Janie as if she were a flower ("She had glossy leaves and bursting buds"). The language of this passage does not merely or externally describe what Janie is feeling, as if her feelings were simply being reported by an objective observer. Rather, the phrasing vividly reenacts or re-creates her thoughts and feelings, directly engaging the reader in her excitement and puzzlement: "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! … Where were the singing bees for her?" In sentences like these, as in so much of the book, we find ourselves not simply observing Janie but experiencing what goes on inside her mind; we feel what she feels and think what she thinks. We commune with Janie much as she communes with nature.

## Janie Speaks to Jody before He Dies

### Context

In the following passage, which appears four paragraphs from the end of chapter 8, Janie confronts Joe on his deathbed just before he passes away.

"'Tain't really no need of you dying, Jody, if you had of—de doctor—but it don't do no good bringin' dat up now. Dat's just whut Ah wants tuh say, Jody. You wouldn't listen. You done lived wid me for twenty years and you don't half know me atall. And you could have but you was so busy worshippin' de works of yo' own hands, and cuffin' folks around in their minds till you didn't see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have."  
"Leave heah, Janie. Don't come heah—"  
"Ah knowed you wasn't gointuh lissen tuh me. You changes everything but nothin' don't change you—not even death. But Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash down and then die ruther than tuh let yo'self heah 'bout it. Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me."  
"Shut up! Ah wish thunder and lightnin' would kill yuh!"  
"Ah know it. And now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain't tried to pacify *nobody* but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice."

### Analysis

Like so much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this passage reveals Hurston's talent for characterization, especially for both depicting and implying character through dialogue. Likewise, here, as so often elsewhere, Hurston effectively employs a regional and racial dialect that is both credible and convincing, and yet the dialect is never so heavy, thick, or unusual that it becomes difficult to understand (a flaw that sometimes affects the writings of other authors who emphasize "local color"). The present episode is especially significant, however, less for the way Janie talks than for the substance of what she says. This passage shows the extent to which she has now found—and is willing to use—an independent voice; she asserts her freedom to speak, a freedom intimately connected to her growing autonomy in general. Her power in the present scene is partly due, of course, to Joe's physical and psychological weakness, and as the scene develops, there is even a sense in which Janie herself can be seen as abusively retaliating against all the abuse she has suffered over the years. Yet, if there is, perhaps, a touch of cruelty in some of the stinging words she directs at this dying man, that cruelty is a testament to Hurston's desire to present her characters as complex, credible, and fully human. Hurston pulls no punches when describing the people in this book, even when the person she describes is a protagonist she obviously admires.

Janie begins her speech by trying to exercise restraint, and the structure of the opening sentence here—with its dashes and fractured syntax—neatly conveys the hesitations and uncertainty of her mood. She is tempted to carp at Joe for refusing to see a doctor (as she had advised him to do), but she instantly stops herself, admitting that "it don't do no good bringin' dat up now." She refrains (at least at this point) from causing Joe any more pain than he is already suffering, but soon her pent-up frustration begins to boil over. It is one thing for Joe to have neglected his own health, but she now begins to berate him for having damaged the health of their marriage. She accuses him of a sort of narcissistic self-idolatry—"you was … busy worshippin' de works of yo' own hands"—phrasing that implies not only his neglect of her and of other people but also his neglect of God or at least of God's creations. And then, in an especially memorable phrase, she rebukes him for allegedly "cuffin' folks around in their minds," thereby suggesting that mental, emotional, and psychological mistreatment is at least as damaging as physical abuse. It is possible to claim, of course, that Janie herself is presently "cuffin'" Joe emotionally and that she is attacking him when he has little ability to defend himself, but her outburst—especially after her initial attempt at self-restraint—is at the very least psychologically credible and may even be morally defensible. Indeed, in a sense, this paragraph epitomizes the history of their entire marriage, in which Janie had restrained herself for years until she could no longer keep silent.

The brevity of Joe's response—"Leave heah, Janie. Don't come heah"—implies both his anger and his weakness, yet it also illustrates how he tries to control her even as he is dying. Ironically, his effort at control only provokes even greater outspokenness. Janie's response is both passionate and rhetorically sophisticated; her words combine colloquial informality with syntactical polish and balance ("You changes everything but nothin' don't change you"). She insists, at long last, that he listen to her, perhaps because she feels she will actually do him some real spiritual good by forcing him to confront and acknowledge his shortcomings before he dies. Earlier, he had refused to hear the diagnosis of a medical doctor; perhaps Janie now feels that she is acting as a kind of spiritual physician, doing Joe some kind of good by using harsh medicine. In any case, her words *are* harsh, especially when she tells him, "Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died." The road is a common symbol in this novel of freedom, exploration, and adventure; it is a path toward the equally symbolic horizon. But, Joe, she claims, sacrificed his own humanity (and damaged hers) by turning himself into a thing, a mere object, and if he is literally facing death now, he metaphorically died a long time ago. She had once hoped "tuh keep house" with Joe "in uh wonderful way," phrasing that nicely implies a domestic ideal of husband and wife as a single unit, together in a small space and enjoying the literal wonder (implying something marvelous, surprising, awe-inspiring, and even miraculous) that a good marriage can excite. However, instead of keeping house with Joe, as his partner and helpmate, Janie feels as if her "own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." Once again, it is less Joe's physical abuse that bothers her than the mental abuse it results from and manifests. Janie is less concerned with anything Joe has done to her body than with what he has tried to do to her mind. Her speech here proves that his efforts failed.

## Janie Reflects on Her Past

### Context

In the following passage, which occurs four paragraphs into chapter 9, Janie, following Joe's funeral, thinks about her past as she contemplates her future.

Most of the day she was at the store, but at night she was there in the big house and sometimes it creaked and cried all night under the weight of lonesomeness. Then she'd lie awake in bed asking lonesomeness some questions. She asked if she wanted to leave and go back where she had come from and try to find her mother. Maybe tend her grandmother's grave. Sort of look over the old stamping ground generally. Digging around inside of herself like that she found that she had no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all. She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people;* it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things.* It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait.

### Analysis

The daytime and the store are the time and place symbolically associated with Janie's public life and social identity; it is at the store that she earns her material living and interacts—if only in a superficial and minimally satisfying way—with other people. On the one hand, the store is now the symbol of her financial independence and social prominence; on the other hand, it is also the place that ties her to a public role from which she derives little genuine pleasure. The store, then, is a paradoxical site: a place associated both with power and with powerlessness, both with independence and with unwanted ties. The same is true of Janie's "big house": Its size symbolizes her social status, material comfort, and financial success, but its very largeness also emphasizes her loneliness and isolation. Using alliterative sound effects of her own to mimic the sound effects she describes, Hurston reports that the house "creaked and cried" during the "night," a time often associated with privacy, peace, and calm but one that is also associated here with the "weight of loneliness." Janie, of course, felt lonely in the house even (or especially) when Joe was still alive, but now she feels lonely in a different way. Meanwhile, the fact that she feels alone while lying "awake in bed" already implies that part of her desire for companionship may have a sexual edge, an implication that will soon be borne out when Tea Cake enters the novel.

It is typical of Hurston to personify an emotion (thus Janie begins "asking loneliness some questions"), and it is also typical of Janie to be inquisitive and quite literally thoughtful. If Hurston were writing a different kind of book (with a more obviously feminist emphasis), Janie probably would be strongly sympathetic toward (or at least forgiving of) her mother and grandmother. Instead, Janie has no desire to see her mother and feels a surprising bitterness toward Nanny. Many writers would have been tempted to present an old, poor, lonely black woman living in the racist South as an entirely attractive character; many others would have been tempted to blame any faults of such a character on racial, sexual, or economic oppression. Janie, however, refuses to excuse her grandmother's conduct on any of these grounds. She seems to regard her grandmother as her initial oppressor, and the "hate" she now feels for the old, dead woman is something Janie thinks she has hidden "from herself all these years under a cloak of pity." Her willingness to express explicit "hate" for her grandmother may not be entirely attractive, but it is honest—both on her part and on Hurston's. Throughout the novel, Janie learns about herself by learning about her relations with others; each of her relationships with other people—such as her first two husbands and her grandmother—involves choices both by her and by them, and Janie's new willingness to judge her grandmother so strongly implies that she has reached a new stage of psychological development. First she freed herself from Killick and Joe; now she frees herself from Nanny.

In her youth and adolescence, Janie believes, she "had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons," phrasing that combines two of the novel's major symbolic motifs. That search was to be a search for other *"people,"* and the fact that Hurston italicizes this word helps emphasize that Janie's quest has never been a quest for new places per se or for material success but rather for satisfying human relationships. Janie thinks that "it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her," and while such phrasing may make Janie sound either charmingly naive or extremely egotistical, another way to read it is as a sign of her appealing self-confidence and genuine enthusiasm. She thinks she has something of value (herself) to share with others; she regards herself as a human being worth knowing, just as she herself desires to know others. Thus, it seems all the more ironic to her that she thinks she has so far been treated like an animal ("she had been whipped like a cur dog"), like a material object ("she had been set in the market-place to sell"), and like a mere mechanism or piece of dead flesh designed to lure stupid predators ("set for still-bait"). She feels that she has been used, and the target of most of her bitterness is not a white man, a black man, a rich boss, or a patriarchal power structure but her own grandmother, who acted (paradoxically) out of misguided affection, or (in one of Hurston's typically skillful neologisms) "mislove." Her grandmother's motives matter less to Janie than the real results of her behavior, and the main result, as far as Janie is concerned, was to tie a metaphorical knot "about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her." In Janie's eyes, Nanny is one of the real villains of this book. Whether Hurston wants us entirely to accept Janie's view is a tantalizingly open question. There can be no denying, however, that in presenting Janie here, as in presenting Janie and other characters elsewhere, Hurston allows them to be brutally frank, and the author is thus brutally frank herself. We may not admire or share Janie's view of her grandmother, but we have to admire Hurston for depicting Janie so honestly.

## Tea Cake Beats Janie

### Context

In the following passage, which opens chapter 17, Tea Cake beats Janie in order to display his authority over her in front of their fellow fieldworkers in Florida. He particularly wants to make a statement to Mrs. Turner, a light-skinned black who thinks the dark-skinned Tea Cake is not good enough for Janie. Mrs. Turner hopes that Janie will instead become involved with Mrs. Turner's brother.

A great deal of the old crowd were back. But there were lots of new ones too. Some of these men made passes at Janie, and women who didn't know took out after Tea Cake. Didn't take them long to be put right, however. Still and all, jealousies arose now and then on both sides. When Mrs. Turner's brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show her he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made the men dream dreams.  
"Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom told him. "Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em. Dat's de reason Ah done quit beatin' mah woman. You can't make no mark on 'em at all. Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake?"  
"Dat's right."

### Analysis

This passage is often considered one of the most puzzling—and even one of the most disturbing—in the entire novel. Tea Cake's decision to beat or slap Janie in order to assert his own power seems quite literally to fly in the face of standard assumptions about this couple's deeply loving relationship, and commentators have often been at pains to make some kind of sense of Tea Cake's behavior here. Some have pointed out that Janie, after all, had slapped Tea Cake earlier in the novel, so Tea Cake here may simply be responding in kind. Other analysts have suggested that Tea Cake resorts to violence because he feels powerless to express himself in words (although he later offers a perfectly lucid account of his motives when he says that he beat Janie to display his authority to the Turners). Still other critics have seen an erotic component to the beating, while others have noted that domestic violence was far more commonly accepted—and expected—in Hurston's era than it tends to be today. Tea Cake has sometimes been seen as reverting, in this passage, to standard patterns of sexist behavior, as if Hurston intended to show that even the most highly appealing male in the book is not immune to chauvinist temptations. Whatever the explanation, the passage definitely illustrates Hurston's tendency to present all her characters—even the most attractive—as potentially flawed and fallible. No one lacks his or her faults in Hurston's novel. Here, as so often elsewhere, her writing is sometimes shockingly unsentimental and unromantic.

It seems significant that this chapter begins by referring to the return of the "old crowd." Tea Cake slaps Janie partly to make a point to the other workers; his brutality is in part a public performance, and he acts as he does partly to impress the "crowd" (a word that makes them almost sound like an amorphous mob rather than a coherent community). He wants, of course, especially to send a message to the light-skinned Mrs. Turner and her equally light-skinned brother, but he is also throwing down the gauntlet in general, particularly to the men from the "crowd" who have "made passes at Janie." It seems ironic, of course, that his decision to resort to violence is described as the result of a "brainstorm": His behavior, after all, seems anything but reasonable, intelligent, or intellectual, but perhaps the second syllable of that word is meant to suggest a mind that is partly chaotic and out of control. His behavior is both calculated and wanton, but it is also paradoxical in other ways as well. It is an assertion of strength that is rooted in fear; it is a demonstration of power that is prompted by weakness; it is an attempt to alleviate psychological pain ("that awful fear inside him") by inflicting physical pain on another person. Worried that he may be insufficiently attractive (because of his very dark skin) to retain Janie's affection, he runs the risk of making himself seem even less attractive—to her and to Hurston's readers—by beating the woman he claims he loves. Motivated by a desire to teach lighter-skinned blacks a lesson, he seems for a moment to confirm a standard racist slander against allegedly violent black males. In all these ways and in many others, this passage is highly unsettling, particularly since Tea Cake's behavior is explicitly condemned by no one—not by the narrator, not by the "crowd," and not even by Janie herself. Indeed, if anything, the narrator seems to make excuses for Tea Cake ("No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show her he was boss"). Meanwhile, the members of the crowd—both men and women—actually seem to approve of his behavior and even openly admire it. Ironically, however, the very places in the text that seem to minimize the significance of Tea Cake's violence are perhaps the most disturbing parts of this passage. It seems bad enough that Tea Cake beats Janie; it seems even worse that his conduct is not only not condemned but is minimized and even applauded. Tea Cake wins the respect of the community but loses, to some degree, the respect of many readers.

Paradoxes continue to pile up as this passage proceeds. Thus, while Mrs. Turner thinks light-skinned blacks are superior because they more closely resemble whites, Sop-de-Bottom values light-skinned women mainly because their bruises are more easily visible. Although Tea Cake beats Janie partly because he feels jealous, his behavior arouses "a sort of envy" in the crowd. Sop-de-Bottom refrains from beating his wife only because her skin is so dark that no one would know if he did abuse her, and Sop-de-Bottom even invokes the name of God while salivating over the possibility of committing domestic violence ("Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie!"). Sop-de-Bottom's whole speech, in fact, would seem almost comically absurd if the issue he discusses were not so serious, and the difficulty of knowing what to make of his comments is just part of the many interpretive puzzles this passage presents.

## Janie Contemplates Her Life and Remembers Tea Cake

### Context

In the following passage, which consists of the final paragraphs of the novel, Janie is back in her town where she spent many years of her life with Joe. She has just finished recounting the events of her life to Pheoby, the old friend who came to visit her in the opening pages of the book.

There was a finished silence after that so that for the first time they could hear the wind picking up in the pine trees. It made Pheoby think of Sam waiting for her and getting fretful. It made Janie think about that room upstairs—her bedroom. Pheoby hugged Janie real hard and cut the darkness in flight.  
Soon everything around downstairs was shut and fastened. Janie mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in the fire. Her shadow behind fell black and headlong down the stairs. Now, in her room, the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness. She closed in and sat down. Combing road-dust out of her hair. Thinking.  
The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in the meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.

### Analysis

This closing passage of the novel inevitably—and often deliberately—reminds the reader of much that has come before, either because of the similarities involved or because of the differences. Thus, the gentle image of "the wind picking up in the pine trees" cannot help but recall all the earlier images of nature as peaceful and beautiful, but it also evokes, by contrast, memories of the destructive fury of the hurricane. Janie has arrived at a moment of harmony and tranquillity in her eventful life ("Here was peace"), but there is no guarantee that such serenity will continue. Some critics, in fact, suggest that the ending of the novel may be implicitly tragic, since Janie, like Tea Cake, may have been infected with rabies. If this is true, then the entire closing passage can be seen as highly ironic. On the most obvious level, however, the passage celebrates concord, communion, and happiness. Janie and Pheoby now enjoy an even closer friendship than before; Pheoby now has an even greater appreciation for the loving man who is "getting fretful" because of her absence; and even Janie, although alone, still has her consoling memories of Tea Cake. The ending of the novel celebrates not only the friendship of two women (Pheoby and Janie) but also the satisfactions of love between the sexes.

Much of the phrasing of this final passage seems resonant with symbolism. Thus, Janie is alone in a dark house, but the house seems secure and protected ("everything around downstairs was shut and fastened"). The house is indeed dark, but Janie carries a lamp that almost seems emblematic of the way she is associated with light and life throughout the novel. She climbs the stairs alone, just as the whole book can be seen as an account of her symbolic movement upward toward independence and self-sufficiency. Any shadows, both literal and symbolic, are now behind her, while the "road-dust" she combs from her hair implies that although her journey has not been easy, she carries pieces of the places she has visited back with her, into a home that seems old but also new. She recalls all the painful episodes in her recent past (including "the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse"), but then she also has a vision of Tea Cake "prancing" around her, a verb that suggests energy, joy, pride, elation, vigor, and youthful vitality. Her vision of Tea Cake is associated with images of contact with nature: When she thinks of him, she also thinks of open windows, of the tops of pine trees, and most significantly in view of all the surrounding darkness, of Tea Cake wearing "the sun for a shawl." He is thus symbolically associated with light, life, and comforting warmth. The metaphorical illumination he provides is far greater than the literal light offered by Janie's small lamp, and indeed, here, as so often elsewhere in the novel, Hurston seems less concerned with mundane physical facts than with the thoughts and feelings that give any "facts" their real human significance.

Therefore, although Tea Cake is literally deceased, Hurston writes—in an effectively brief and therefore emphatic sentence—that "Of course he wasn't dead." She continues: "He could never be dead until she [Janie] herself had finished feeling and thinking." In some ways, this claim seems naively romantic, but in other ways, it states a simple fact: Tea Cake will live on in Janie's memories. Janie has learned that what goes on inside the mind is at least as important as anything that happens to the body, and she has also learned that perceptions greatly affect and shape the way "reality" is experienced. Her memories of Tea Cake are now permanent parts of her psyche; he is not only a figure from her past but will continue to affect her future. Thus, in a lovely and vivid phrase, Hurston refers unexpectedly to the "kiss of his memory" (instead of using the more usual and predictable phrase "the memory of his kiss"). Here, as so often throughout this novel, Hurston describes a mental event as if it were a physical, sensual experience. Real knowledge, for Hurston, is something that can almost be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted.

Thus, it hardly seems surprising that the final word of the book is the verb *see.* Indeed, the entire final sentence seems rich with symbolic meaning. Like so much of the novel, it begins by focusing on Janie herself. It then presents Janie in a position of control, taking initiative, exerting authority, and metaphorically speaking or "call[ing]" to her "soul." If the entire novel has been, in one sense, a story about Janie acquiring an independent voice, then here we see her metaphorically speaking to (and summoning) her own spirit. Her "soul," in fact, has been the focus of the novel; what has happened to Janie's body has been far less important than what has been going on in her mind and heart. Her body has made many literal journeys throughout the course of the book, but it is her soul that has made the most significant progress. It is her "soul" that is finally able to "see," and the vision Janie ultimately achieves is one that Hurston generously shares with her readers.

Evans, Robert C., gen. ed. "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The American Novel*, Understanding Literature through Close Reading. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2011. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=ULAN0267&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### "The porch couldn't talk for looking": Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 2001  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** Deborah Clarke  
**From:** *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views.

"So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different from a coon hide." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 7)

When Janie explains to her friend Pheoby the reason that simply telling her story will not suffice, why she needs to provide the "'understandin' to go 'long wid it,''' she employs a metaphor of vision: Unless you *see* the fur, you can't tell a mink from a coon. Stripped of their defining visual characteristics, the hides collapse into sameness. Recognizing visual difference, Hurston suggests, is crucial to understanding how identity is constructed: by skin and color. With this claim, she invokes new avenues into an African American tradition that has privileged voice as its empowering trope. From Phillis Wheatley's demonstration that an African can have a poetic voice, to Frederick Douglass's realization that freedom is measured by words and the ability to address a white audience, to Charles Chesnutt's presentation of the triumph of black storytelling in *The Conjure Woman*, voice has prevailed as the primary medium through which African American writers have asserted identity and humanity. Voice announced that visual difference was only skin deep, that black bodies housed souls that were, in essence, no different from those residing in white bodies. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is very much a part of this tradition, and has inspired many fine studies on the ways that its protagonist finds a voice and a self.1 Yet, as others have pointed out, Janie's voice is by no means unequivocally established by the end of the book. Robert Stepto was among the first to express dissatisfaction with the narrative structure and its third-person narrator; for him, the use of the narrator implies that "Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (166). More recently, Michael Awkward has pointed out that Janie is not interested in telling the community her story upon her return (6), and Mary Helen Washington argues that Janie is silenced at crucial spots in the narrative. Carla Kaplan, reviewing the discussions of voice that the novel has inspired, examines the ways that voice is both celebrated and undermined, noting that "Hurston privileges dialogue and storytelling at the same time as she represents and applauds Janie's *refusal* to speak" (121). Clearly, Janie's achievement of a voice is critical to her journey to self-awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough. As Maria Tai Wolff notes, "For telling to be successful, it must become a presentation of sights with words. The best talkers are 'big picture talkers'" (226). For Hurston, then, the construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see, a voice that celebrates the visible presence of black bodies.

I would suggest that, with its privileging of "mind pictures" over words, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* goes beyond a narrative authority based solely on voice, for, as Janie tells Pheoby, "'Talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else'" (183). In contrast to Joe Starks, who seeks to be a "big voice" only to have his wish become humiliatingly true when Janie informs him that he "'big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice'" (75), Janie seeks for a voice which can picture, which can make you see. The ability to use voice visually provides a literary space for African American women to relate their experiences in a world where, as Nanny says, "'We don't know nothin' but what we see'" (14). Thus, to expand "what we see" increases what we know. Throughout the novel, Hurston's use of visual imagery challenges dominant theories about the power hierarchies embedded in sight, long associated with white control, with Plato's rationality and logic, and, from a Freudian perspective, with male sexual dominance. She recasts the visual to affirm the beauty and power of color and to provide a vehicle for female agency.

In so doing, Hurston opens up different ways of conceptualizing the African American experience. Responding to the long history of blacks as spectacle—from slavery to minstrelsy to colonized object—she offers the possibility of reclaiming the visual as a means of black expression and black power. Controlling vision means controlling what we see, how we define the world. Visual power, then, brings political power, since those who determine what is seen determine what exists.2

In recent times, the Rodney King beating trial highlighted the significance of this power, when white interpretation sought to reverse the apparent vision presented by the video of the assault. Commenting on the trial, Judith Butler writes that the "visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (17). Zora Neale Hurston recognized this, anticipating what Houston Baker terms the "'scening' of the African presence" as a means of silencing that presence (42). As opposed to the King jurors, who learned not to see what was presented, Hurston's Janie makes readers "see" her story, and thus takes control of both the visual field and its interpretation. Visual control is not, obviously, the answer to racist oppression: Had the jurors "seen" what happened to Rodney King, it would not have undone his beating, and Hurston fully realized that black bodies bear the material evidence of racial violence (indeed, Janie's perceived beauty—her long hair and light skin—results from an interracial rape). But by taking visual control, Hurston looks back, challenges white dominance, and documents its material abuse of African Americans.

She thus manages to present a material self that can withstand the power of the gaze, transforming it into a source of strength. In establishing a rhetoric of sight, Hurston ensures that black bodies remain powerfully visible throughout the novel, particularly the bodies of black women.3 As Audre Lorde has noted, visibility is the cornerstone of black female identity, "without which we cannot truly live":

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness…. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (Lorde 42)

In attempting to reclaim visibility, Hurston focuses not just on rendering black bodies visible, but also on redeeming the "distortion of vision" of which Lorde speaks. Neither is an easy task, for Janie's visible beauty makes her vulnerable to both adoration and abuse, and the ability to see does not come readily. As the title of the novel indicates, Hurston is interested in far more than the development of one woman's journey to self-knowledge; she seeks to find a discourse that celebrates both the voices and the bodies of African Americans. By emphasizing "watching God," she foregrounds sight.

The existing theoretical work on vision is both useful and limiting for one seeking to understand Hurston's use of visual language. While various feminist theorists such as Braidotti, Haraway, and Keller have contributed greatly to our understanding of the topic, joining film theorists Mulvey, Doane, and Silverman, their work does not always take race sufficiently into account, though Jane Gaines reminds us of the racial privilege inherent in the gaze: "Some groups," she remarks, "have historically had the license to 'look' openly while other groups have 'looked' illicitly" (25). Some African American theorists such as Fanon, Wallace, and hooks do engage issues of visibility, but it is surprisingly under-examined in African American literary and film theory despite the fact that the visual is critical to black female identity, the source, Lorde insists, of black women's vulnerability and strength. Michelle Wallace has noted that "black women are more often visualized in mainstream American culture … than they are allowed to speak their own words or speak about their condition as women of color" (*Invisibility* 3). Hurston takes this visualization and turns it into a source of strength and a kind of language, thus redeeming visibility and establishing voice. While vision has long been associated with objectivity, this objective position has been assumed to be raceless (white) and sexless (male). Hurston exposes these dynamics, and in so doing lays the groundwork for a kind of vision that embodies blackness as both body and voice. The visible presence of Janie's material body reflects the complex historical and cultural forces which have created her and offers her a unique, individual identity. The visual, then, allows for a negotiation between the post-structuralist argument that identity is largely a construction and the concerns, particularly by nonwhites, that such a position erases individual identity and presence just as non-white peoples are beginning to lay claim to them. Awareness of the visible brings together the "politics of positioning," of who can look, with a recognition of the political and psychological significance of the gaze and with the "real" presence of a material body and individual self (Braidotti 73).

Hurston's insistence on the importance of visual expression, of course, stems largely from racism's disregard for African American individuality. In "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston explains the American attitude toward blacks as "THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY. This is an intangible built on folk belief. It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes. Everybody knows all about them. They are lay figures mounted in the museum where all may take them in at a glance" (170).4 By characterizing the white American perspective as that of museum-goers, Hurston suggests that the non-white population becomes mere spectacle, "lay figures" to be taken in "at a glance" by white eyes. We generally see this power dynamic in operation when black bodies are displayed. In minstrel shows, as Eric Lott points out, "'Black' figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures" (140–141).

The dynamic still exists. Steven Speilberg's 1997 film *Amistad*, for example, opens with an extended display of naked black bodies and offers its black cast few words, inviting the public to view blackness rather than listen to it.5 One is defined by how one is seen. For African Americans, this leads to a condition of "hypervisibility," in which "the very publicness of black people as a social fact works to undermine the possibility of actually seeing black specificity" (Lubiano 187). We need only look to Frantz Fanon for confirmation: "… already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed.* … I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!" (116). The racist power of visibility thus seems daunting, but Hurston not only takes on the challenge of reclaiming the visual as racially affirmative, she does so in response to a masculinist tradition in which visual power so often objectifies women. Her fiction reveals that, even in the context of a black community, the ability to see "black specificity" may be impaired, particularly when the specific individual is a woman. Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, who pioneered the participant-observer model of anthropological study, recognized the need for looking closely and carefully.6

*Their Eyes* opens with almost an anthropological tone, presenting us with a group of people who have been "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long" (1). After spending their days erased by white eyes as a specific presence, they become talkers and lookers. In order to regain human identity after "mules and other brutes had occupied their skins," they need to speak, listen, and see. It is important to note that Hurston equates all three sensory apparati; she does not privilege the verbal over the visual. Just as Pheoby's "hungry listening" helps Janie tell her story, so Janie's keen vision provides her with a story to tell. This vision is far different from one which "glances" at objects in a museum; such a way of seeing merely replicates white erasure of everything but skin color. Hurston seeks a uniquely African American vision, a way of seeing that both recognizes color and sees beyond it. But being black does not automatically confer, for Hurston, visual ability. In fact, visual language is predominately associated with women in her work. As Michelle Wallace has observed, "Gender is as important as 'race' to understanding how 'invisibility' has worked historically in all fields of visual production" ("Race" 258). Initially, the "big picture talkers" are male in this novel, and much of the talk centers on impressing and evaluating women. Janie's first appearance in Eatonville causes Hicks to proclaim his plans to get a woman just like her "'Wid mah talk'"(34). Hurston's challenge is to redeploy the language of the visual in ways that do not simply re-evoke the objectification of women of any color by situating them as objects of the male gaze.

In a culture that has so long defined black people as spectacle and black women as sexualized bodies, one needs to transform and redeem the potential of vision. While the visual certainly holds the threat of objectification, it can also serve as action—both personal and political. bell hooks argues that, for blacks, looking can be viewed as an act of resistance. She asserts that "all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze … produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze." With this gaze African Americans declared, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (116). Looking becomes an act charged with political resistance, a way to reconfigure the world and its power dynamics.7One must look, then, at African American writing as a means of challenging the power of the white gaze. We need to employ what Mae Henderson terms a new "angle of vision" (161), a means of looking back, of seeing without objectifying. To analyze Hurston's "angle of vision," I would argue, necessitates bringing together a wide range of theoretical perspectives, for seeing and being seen are highly complex acts in her fiction, acts which place individuals within an intricate web of personal and historical forces.

In Hurston's work, looking is more than a confrontational challenge. Her fiction is replete with examples of women's need to look, see, understand, and use language visually. In "Drenched in Light," an autobiographical story which recalls Hurston's descriptions of her childhood days, Isis, "a visual minded child," "pictur[es] herself gazing over the edge of the world into the abyss" (942). She escapes punishment for her many mischievous actions by impressing a white lady as being "drenched in light" (946); her strong visual force marks her as a child destined for creative accomplishment. Delia, the protagonist of "Sweat," prefigures Janie in her use of visual metaphors to re-evaluate her marriage. "She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way" (957). This visual realization grants Delia the strength to defy her abusive husband. "The Gilded Six-Bits" presents the story of Missie May, unable to see through the shining currency to recognize its meager value; this mis-sight leads her to an affair with the man who owns the false coins, nearly ruining her marriage. Interestingly, her husband Joe finally forgives her when her son is born and turns out to be "'de spittin image'" (995) of Joe himself. Only visual proof of paternity can erase his anger.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in many ways a pre-text for *Their Eyes*, examines many of the same issues of voice and identity with a male protagonist. But though John Pearson, like Janie Crawford, struggles to establish a self, he does not employ her rhetoric of sight. In fact, his white boss specifically associates him with blindness as an explanation for John's lack of foresight:

"Of course you did not know. Because God has given to all men the gift of blindness. That is to say that He has cursed but few with vision. Ever hear tell of a happy prophet? This old world wouldn't roll on the way He started it if men could see. Ha! In fact, I think God Himself was looking off when you went and got yourself born." (86)

Not only is John a result of God's blindness, but John consistently fails to see his way, particularly in failing to pick up on Hattie's use of conjure tricks to entrap him into a second marriage. The vision in the novel belongs to his first wife, Lucy. She is the one whose "large bright eyes looked thru and beyond him and saw too much" (112). Lucy, far more self-aware and perceptive than John, harnesses the power of vision so successfully that her visions live on after her death. Interestingly, when John finally does attain a degree of vision, it proves highly ambiguous and problematic, leading to his death when he drives his car into a railroad crossing: "He drove on but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward" (167). Lacking Lucy's ability to put her visual power to practical use, John fatally blinds himself to his surroundings and pays the ultimate price for his inability to see. Here Hurston sets up her paradigm: Vision must be embodied, one must see outwardly as well as inwardly.

Hurston establishes the full power of the visual in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Initially subjected to the defining and objectifying power of a communal gaze, Janie, unlike John Pearson, learns to employ vision in ways that are self-affirming rather than self-sacrificing. Returning to Eatonville at the novel's start, Janie finds herself in a position very familiar to her: the object that all eyes are upon. When she approaches, the people are full of hostile questions to which they "hoped the answers were cruel and strange" (4). But when she keeps on walking, refusing to stop and acquiesce to their voyeuristic desires, talk becomes specularization: "The porch couldn't talk for looking." The men notice her "firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt." The women focus on the "faded shirt and muddy overalls." Looking at her body, the men see her as sexed; for the women, gazing on her apparel, she is gendered. In both cases, it seems, Janie vanishes. The men define her as female body parts and the women deny her feminine identity. While the female resentment of her attire may seem less intrusive than the male x-ray vision, both looks constitute "mass cruelty" (2). Yet having set up Janie as spectacle, Hurston then illuminates the positive potential of vision in the ensuing interchange with Pheoby. Here, the visual takes on a different tone. Just as voice, according to Kaplan, becomes a kind of double-edged sword, so can vision—particularly when shared between friends—both specularize and affirm. Pheoby tells Janie, "'Gal you sho looks *good.* … Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood'" (4). What she sees is presence, not absence. To look like a woman is to look good, a way of visualizing which does not fixate on sexual anatomy but which allows for materiality. She *shows* her womanhood, a far different sight than that gazed upon by the men, who see not Janie's presence but their own desire, desire which her body is expected to satisfy.

The materiality of Janie's body as an object of desire has, of course, determined much of her history. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, presumably wants to marry her based on what he sees, though her own eyes tell her something very different: "'He look like some old skullhead in de grave yard'" (13). But her vision lacks authority; despite what her eyes tell her, she is married off to him, defeated by Nanny's powerful story of her own oppression which seems to give her the right to impose her will upon Janie. Having "'save[d] de text,'" Nanny uses language to desecrate Janie's vision of the pear tree (16). Joe Starks, Janie's next husband, is likewise attracted to her beauty: "He stopped and looked hard, and then he asked her for a cool drink of water." This time, Janie does not submit passively to this specularization, and tries to look back, to return the gaze, pumping the water "until she got a good look at the man" (26). But her look still lacks the controlling power of the male gaze, what hooks calls the ability to "change reality." At this point, Janie has difficulty even seeing reality, as is evidenced by her inability to see through Joe Starks. She takes "a lot of looks at him and she was proud of what she saw. Kind of portly, like rich white folks" (32). What Janie sees is whiteness, and her valuation of this sets her on a path that will take twenty years to reverse. Looking at Joe's silk shirt, she overlooks his language of hierarchy, his desire to be a big voice. She has privileged the wrong kind of sight, a vision that fails to see into blackness and thus fails to see through language.

Still, Janie is not entirely fooled. Joe does "not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (28). Janie thus gives up a vision she has seen—that of the pear tree—in favor of one she can only imagine: horizons, chance, and change. In allowing herself to be swayed by his language, she fails to notice that his rhetoric is that of speech, not vision. Joe only speaks; he does not see. Consequently, Janie's own vision deteriorates even further. Having initially recognized that Joe does not represent "sun-up and pollen," she later manages to convince herself that he does: "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (31). Stubbornly, she tries to force Joe into her vision, possibly to justify running off with him. Convincing herself to see what is not there leads Janie into an unequal marriage in which she is expected to sit on a "high chair" (58), an infantilizing position where she can overlook the world and yet also be subjected to its envious eyes.

But Joe has a problem, for while he wants to put Janie on display in order to reap the benefit of reflected glory as her owner, this is precisely the position which is threatened by the eyes of other men. He wants her to be both present and absent, both visible and invisible, a task he attempts to accomplish by insisting that she keep her hair tied up in a head rag because he sees the other men not just "figuratively wallowing in it" (51) but literally touching it, and she "was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (52). Joe wants to engage privately in scopophilia within a public forum, without subjecting Janie herself to this public gaze. Once she is fixed by gazes other than his own, he loses his exclusive ownership of her body. As Lorde notes, while visibility entails vulnerability, it can also be a source of great strength, a characteristic Joe certainly does not want to see in Janie. But the situation reflects more than Joe's concern about Janie's gaining cultural power; Janie's visibility also invokes a classic Freudian scenario. Laura Mulvey, in her groundbreaking psychoanalytic study "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," notes that the female figure, beyond providing pleasure for the looker, also implies a certain threat: "her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure…. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of the men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (21). Indeed, Joe's greatest anxiety is not focused on Janie's body but on his own. He wants to have the dominant position, but without being visually objectified by the viewers. "The more his back ached and his muscle dissolved into fat and the fat melted off his bones the more fractious he became with Janie. Especially in the store. The more people in there the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (73–74).

But the racial situation problematizes this notion of woman as icon, which presumes looking to be a masculine act. The cultural permutations of the significance of the gaze within the African American community challenge a strictly Freudian reading. If looking is an act of political defiance, it cannot be exclusively associated with black masculinity, particularly given the long history of black female activism and resistance. When Janie challenges Joe, she does so not just to defend her female identity—"'Ah'm uh woman every inch of me'" (75)—but also to protest against Joe's almost constant oppression. Joe, with his prosperity and seemingly white values, fails to realize that his mouth is not all-powerful, that, despite his favorite expression, "I god," he is not divine. His centrality as mayor and store owner renders him even more vulnerable to specularization than Janie, and he falls prey to a kind of reversed Freudian schema of the gaze which entails serious repercussions for his political power.

Having set up the dynamics of the body as visualized object, Joe becomes its victim, as Janie linguistically performs the castration of which she is the visual reminder. As she tells him publicly, "'When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life,'" her pictorial language renders it impossible for him to deny the vision she creates. He tries to erase the image by questioning her speech. "'Wha—whut's dat you said?'" It doesn't work, however, for Walter taunts him, "'You heard her, you ain't blind.'" This comment highlights the interconnection between hearing and seeing; to hear is to see. And yet, given the words of her insult, Joe might as well be blind, for Janie has, in fact, revealed his lack of visual difference. By not using a visual metaphor in this case, she emphasizes that there is nothing there to see. She bares his body to the communal gaze, not only denying his masculinity but displaying his lack to other men: "She had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing" (75). Feminized by the visual dynamics that he has established, Joe dies, unable to withstand the gaze which erases his masculinity and identifies him as empty armor. Not only is it impossible for him to continue as mayor under these circumstances, it is impossible for him to continue. Joe has no life once denied both sexual and political power.

Though Hurston uses the visual to expose the vulnerability of a phallocentrism which abuses women, she also recognizes its empowering potential. In transforming the visual into a tool of female power, Hurston reclaims the power of the visual as a vehicle for examining African American women's experiences. After all, if one erases vision, one erases race, which is culturally visualized by the physical body, the sign of visual difference. As Michelle Wallace notes, "How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual" ("Modernism" 40). Racial visibility as a marker of difference allows black women to "show" their womanhood.

Yet, as Joe's experience makes clear, this must be a particular kind of vision, a way of seeing which expands rather than limits understanding. Despite Joe's entrapment in his own gaze, the novel is replete with examples of the affirmative quality of the visual. Janie's attempts to define a self originate with the act of looking. Her "conscious life" begins with her vision of the pear tree, leading to her sexual awakening. Having felt called to "gaze on a mystery" (10), she beholds a "revelation" in the bees and flowers. She seeks her own place in the picture, searching for "confirmation of the voice and vision." Looking down the road, she sees a "glorious being" whom, in her "former blindness," she had known as "shiftless Johnny Taylor." But the "golden dust of pollen" which "beglamored his rags and her eyes" changes her perspective (11). Johnny Taylor's kiss, espied by Nanny, sets Janie's course in motion. Whether or not Johnny Taylor represents a better possibility is both impossible to determine and irrelevant; what matters is Janie's realization that her fate is linked to her vision, though the recognition will lead her astray until she learns effectively to interpret what she sees.

This vision, after her mistake in mis-seeing Joe Starks, is finally fulfilled when she meets Tea Cake, a man who is willing to display himself rather than subject others to his defining gaze. When Janie says, "'Look lak Ah seen you somewhere,'" he replies, "'Ah'm easy tuh see on Church Street most any day or night'" (90–91). By denying any anxiety in thus being viewed, Tea Cake transforms sight from a controlling, defining gaze into a personal introduction, demystifying himself by inviting inspection. In fact, Tea Cake cautions her about the importance of looking closely in the ensuing checkers game, challenging her claim that he has no right to jump her king because "'Ah wuz lookin' off when you went and stuck yo' men right up next tuh mine. No fair!'" Tea Cake answers, "'You ain't supposed tuh look off, Mis' Starks. It's de biggest part uh de game tuh watch out!'" (92). His response underscores the importance of watching, of using one's vision not to fix and specularize but to see and think, to understand. Consequently, Janie realizes that he "could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101), a man who can confirm her initial vision. She defines him with visual metaphors: "He was a glance from God." This metaphor highlights Tea Cake's connection to the visual; he recognizes the need to combine voice with understanding, remarking that Janie needs "'tellin' and showin' '" (102) to believe in love.

But Janie does not need simply to find a man capable of assimilating voice and vision, she needs to learn for herself how to formulate a self which is not predicated upon oppression. She finds the task particularly challenging because her racial identity is founded upon invisibility, upon her inability to see herself. The photograph which reveals her color, her difference, divides her from her previous notion of the identity of sameness: "'Before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.'" To be black is to be not just different but absent, for Janie looks at the photograph asking, "'Where is me? Ah don't see me'" (9). Both blackness and femininity are culturally predicated upon lack; thus Janie needs to learn to show her womanhood and to find visible presence in blackness. Priscilla Wald has suggested that Janie's problem with seeing herself stems from her "white eyes": "The white eyes with which Janie looks see the black self as absent, that is, do not see the black self at all" (83). This is a particularly important point, for it indicates that Janie needs not just vision, but black vision—black eyes. Vision, which initially divides her from herself, must then provide the means for re-inventing a self, one in which racial identity adds wholeness rather than division. To deny either her blackness or her whiteness is to deny the specificity of her being, for her body is the site of the physical evidence of white oppression and a partially white origin. The answer is not to retreat into colorlessness but to reconstitute the definition of the self into something that acknowledges the conditions of her physical being: the visible evidence of her whiteness and her blackness, the heritage of slavery and sexual abuse.

Janie takes the first step toward acquiring this visual sense of self in response to Joe's oppression. "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes" (73). She sees the self that prostrates itself before Jody as her shadow, and this realization acts on her "like a drug," offering an escape from an oppressive life. In order to move from passive spectator to active doer, however, she needs to take that vision further. The act of seeing must become active and affirmative before she can re-integrate the disparate parts of her identity into one unified whole. As Andrew Lakritz has written, "Some of the most powerful moments in Zora Neale Hurston's writings occur when a figure in the narrative is represented as watching events unfold, when such acts of looking become constitutive of the entire question of identity" (17). But looking itself does not automatically constitute identity; one must learn how to do it. Barbara Johnson's much cited analysis of Janie's recognition of her division into inside and outside also can be viewed as an experience in learning to use the visual. Johnson identifies Janie's realization that the spirit of the marriage has left the bedroom and moved into the parlor as an "externalization of the inner, a metaphorically grounded metonymy," while the following paragraph where Janie sees her image of Jody tumble off a shelf "presents an internalization of the outer, or a metonymically grounded metaphor." This moment leads Janie to a voice which "grows not out of her identity but out of her division into inside and outside. Knowing how not to mix them is knowing that articulate language requires the co-presence of two distinct poles, not their collapse into oneness" (Johnson 212). If, indeed, the moment leads her to voice, it does not lead to a voice of self-assertion, as Janie remains silent under Joe's oppressive control for several more years.

I would suggest that the moment does not engender Janie's voice so much as it moves her toward a way of visualizing her experience which will, in time, lead her toward a picturing voice. In imagining her marriage as living in the parlor, she creates, as Johnson notes, a metonymy. But her metaphor of Joe as statue is also a metaphor infused with vision:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be…. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (67–68)

The significance of this moment lies not just in Janie's recognition of the division between inside and outside but also in the ability to turn her back on the image and "look further." No longer content with surface vision, Janie is learning to "look further," a necessary precondition for finding an expressive voice.

Joe's death offers her further opportunity to use this knowledge as she fixes her gaze upon herself. Janie goes to the mirror and looks "hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (83). This scene illustrates why vision is so crucial to Hurston's work. Recalling Butler's comment that the "visual field" is a "racial formation," one sees Hurston establishing precisely that. In looking hard at her "skin and features," Janie looks hard at her interracial body, seeing it now not as different but as handsome. She uses her own vision to find beauty and value in her visually inscribed racial identity. She then burns her head rags, symbol of Joe's attempts to deny her beauty and to hide her from the communal gaze while subjecting her to his own. Displaying her abundant hair, presumably another indication of her racially mixed heritage, brings her still closer to an affirmation of her visual self, a self that celebrates rather than denying the mark of race—of both races. Kaja Silverman asserts that the "eye can confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain. It can also put what is alien or inconsequential into contact with what is most personal and psychically significant" (227). Even before Janie gains the aid of Tea Cake's loving eye, her own eyes confer love upon her body as she begins to assimilate what has often seemed an alien world into her own psyche.

Janie transforms her understanding of color so that the sting of her original recognition of her photograph, "'Aw! aw! Ah'm colored!'" (9), can be alleviated and reversed by recognizing the visual beauty of color. The evening she meets Tea Cake, she watches the moon rise, "its amber fluid … drenching the earth" (95). This scene reveals the darkness of night to be full of color, transcending the stark blackness of the sky and whiteness of the moon. Hurston thus presents color as a full range of variation and beauty. Janie starts wearing blue because Tea Cake likes to see her in it, telling Pheoby not only that visual mourning should not last longer than grief, but that "'de world picked out black and white for mournin' '" (107–108). By specifically associating mourning with black and white, Hurston subtly suggests that going beyond the color binary moves one from grief to happiness, from mourning and loss to fulfillment. She further challenges the black-white binary with the episode after the storm in the Everglades, when Tea Cake is forcibly conscripted into burying bodies. The white overseers insist that the workers "'examine every last one of 'em and find out if they's white or black'" (162). This ridiculous and horrific command inspires Tea Cake to comment, "'Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law'" (163). The suggestion that God needs the aid of coffins to "see" racial difference again highlights the absurdity of seeing the world only in terms of black and white. By tying vision so intricately to race, Hurston offers a way out of the oppositional hierarchy of both.8

Thus Hurston destabilizes the visual racial binary, and Janie learns a new respect for color and for her own image. She restores the image that was desecrated by the photograph, when Tea Cake tells her to look in the mirror so she can take pleasure from her looks. "Fortunately," says Silverman, "no look ever takes place once and for all" (223). As Hurston well understands, looking is not a static activity. To "transform the value," as Silverman puts it, of what is seen, one needs to use one's life-experience in order to see it better. Having stood up to her husband, survived the gossip implicating her in his death, taken over the business, and dared to consider a lover, Janie learns to transform her gaze into one that accepts and values her own image.

After learning to use her vision to value herself, Janie is ready to take the next step: using vision to find God. The title episode of the novel reveals the full importance of the power of sight and of being an active looker; watching God is an active rather than a passive enterprise.

They sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (151)

Like Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, Hurston re-visions the old white man with a long beard. Instead, one approaches God not just in darkness but by looking *through* darkness, to see God where others see blackness. In so doing, she enables a kind of vision that deifies darkness, replacing the emptiness with presence, presence in blackness. At the height of the storm, Janie tells Tea Cake, "'If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk'" (151). Since she can "see" the light in darkness, neither it nor death holds any fear for her. By having her characters watch God in darkness, Hurston redefines rationalist and masculine control of the gaze, transforming scopophilia into spirituality. Her enabled gaze does not make women specularizable, for it takes place in darkness; rather, it makes God viewable and blackness visible. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, the midwife Lone, trying to find out what the men plan to do to the women at the convent, sits in the dark to read the signs: "Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself" (273). Learning how to see—particularly, learning how to see in darkness—takes on special meaning for African American women. One comes to God not through light but through the ability to see in the dark.

But Hurston's world is not solely visual; material bodies exist tactily as well as visually, and color is not always beautiful, as the historical forces of slavery and oppression can be read on Janie's body. She is the product of two generations of rape, one of them interracial. She suffers physically for her interracial body when Tea Cake beats her to display his ownership in the face of Mrs. Turner's theories of Janie's superiority due to her light skin. The bruises, of course, are clearly evident precisely because of that light skin, as Sop-de-Bottom enviously remarks, "'Uh person can see every place you hit her'" (140). These marks inscribe both visually and physically the full implications of her racial identity as well as the violence that brought it into being. Just as black women cannot ignore the visual, neither can they escape the tactile, a physical language which highlights the material racist and sexist abuse of the body.9 As Sharon Davie argues, Hurston's bodily metaphors "acknowledge the tactile, the physical, which Western culture devalues" (454). But Hurston does more than acknowledge the tactile; she *reveals* it. In Hurston's world, the mark of violence is seen, making the tactile visual. Though she celebrates the power of vision, she has no illusions that it can erase or replace the discourse of violence and racism. Rather, it documents, for all to see, the effects of brutality.

Janie's act of killing is an act of physical self-defense to protect the body that Tea Cake has restored to her. Yet even this highly tactile response has a visual component. She waits for a sign from the sky, a visual indication that God will relent and spare Tea Cake's life, but "the sky stayed hard looking and quiet" (169). I find it telling that this is a daytime supplication, as Janie seeks to find a message "beyond blue ether's bosom," waiting for a "star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout." This daylight sky appears much less accessible to her searching eyes than the blackness of the storm. The God sought in darkness evokes a reaffirmation of love, but this light (skinned?) God forces murder. Lack of visual contact spells doom, and Tea Cake's vision consequently suffers to the point where the "fiend in him must kill and Janie was the only thing living he saw" (175). Thus Tea Cake's death both saves Janie's physical body and erases his false vision.

Her final test involves learning to integrate voice and vision in a different form of self-defense. The trial scene reconstitutes Janie as speaker rather than object. The spectators are there not to watch but to listen. Janie's verbal defense succeeds because she "makes them see," a phrase repeated three times in six sentences:

She had to go way back to let them know how she and Tea Cake had been with one another so they could *see* she could never shoot Tea Cake out of malice.

She tried to make them *see* how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him…. She made them *see* how she couldn't ever want to be rid of him. (178; emphasis added)

Despite critical concern with the narrator replacing Janie's voice at this crucial moment, we must recognize that Janie has made them see, as she has already made the reader see, that voice at this moment is subordinate to the ability to visualize, an effect that may be heightened by Hurston's deflection of Janie's story. We don't need to hear her, since we can see her story. She manages to refute the implications of the black male spectators, that "'dem white mens wuzn't goin tuh do nothin' tuh no woman dat look lak her'" (179), and they turn their anger against Mrs. Turner's brother who puts "himself where men's wives could look at him" (181). But Janie's looks have not been directed at him; she has been too busy learning to visualize to waste time specularizing.

Consequently, she returns home to discover "'dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along'" (182). Having learned to make presence out of absence, she can now not only re-visualize Tea Cake, whose "memory made pictures of love and light against the wall," but can also call "in her soul to come and see" (184). In thus successfully employing a visualized voice, Janie becomes both spectator and participant in her own life. To speak the body, for an African American woman, means to recognize its visual racial difference as well as affirming its sexual identity. Hurston's mind-pictures and seeing-voices reclaim the physical world of pear trees and the beauty of the visible presence of blackness. As Hurston herself noted, pictorial language is of primary importance in black discourse, where everything is "illustrated. So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" ("Characteristics" 24). By filling Janie "full of that oldest human longing—self revelation" (*Their Eyes* 6), Hurston presents a text of "revelation"—with all of its visual implications. Her hieroglyphics reflect a community of people whose world is their canvas and whose lives and bodies are pictured in living color.

She thus provides a model for reconciling voice and vision, for transforming black bodies from museum pieces or ethnographic objects into embodied voices, by recasting spectacle as visual, a move away from passive sensationalism to active participation. Hortense Spillers notes of the Du Boisian double-consciousness that "it is also noteworthy that his provocative claims … crosses [sic] their wires with the specular and spectacular: the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining being seen through the eyes of another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze" (143). In Hurston's hands, looking is indeed a performative act. In fact, it becomes a linguistic performance which affirms bodily presence, reversing Fanon's claim that, in the white world, "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (110). Hurston, as Priscilla Wald so aptly puts it, "redesignates 'color' as performance in a process that draws her readers into the dynamics of 'coloration'" (87). Through the use of hieroglyphics, she reconstitutes women as active and colored performers. Vision, so often a means of fixing and silencing African Americans, can also provide the means to foreground the body without surrendering the voice. As the title of Hurston's novel indicates, her concern goes beyond presenting an individual woman's journey to self-awareness; her accomplishment is nothing less than redefining African American rhetoric, rendering it verbal and visual.

Clarke, Deborah. "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 599–613. Quoted as "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2008. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=MCVZNH013&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 1994  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** William M. Ramsey  
**From:** *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views.

"I wrote 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again."

Long out of the literary mainstream, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is now a popular text in college studies, and Hurston herself the subject of a growing industry. Yet eager to establish canonical status for *Their Eyes,* that industry tends to gloss over, evade, or ingeniously explain away the novel's most troubling problems, while it is sharply divided on related interpretive issues. Increasingly, as one turns from Hurston's text to the subtle theoretical stratagems in its critical praise, one feels a discrepancy between that initial reading experience and current worship of Hurston's achievement. In the classroom, moreover, students are quick to note evident problems in the text, and are suspicious of strained elaborations and ideological agendas where more candid explanations might better suffice. As Joseph R. Urgo warns: "The need to explain, especially when the explicator is not quite convinced, only emphasizes the assumption of textual weakness. In this way the novel is allowed into the canon with a wink" (42).

*Their Eyes* is an inventive, original, and provocatively compelling novel; nonetheless, it is not a fully finished or conceptually realized text. On this issue the circumstances of its inception are of crucial relevance, as Hurston's own words in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) might suggest. "I wrote 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again. In fact, I regret all of my books."1 Those productive seven weeks are more incredible in light of her other activities, for she was on an anthropological research trip funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her biographer, Robert Hemenway, notes she arrived in Haiti in late September, 1936, and it was concurrent with anthropological collecting that she poured out her novel, dating the finished manuscript December 19, 1936 (244, n. 24). During this time, explains Hemenway, "she perfected her Creole, acquired a working knowledge of voodoo gods, attended a number of ceremonies presided over by a voodoo priest," and was "sometimes writing late at night after a day of collecting" (230).

Moreover, it is well known that her creative motives were enmeshed in the emotions of a failed love relationship. In *Dust Tracks,* she explains how an aborted affair with a man she identifies as A.W.P. (Arthur Price) gave rise to the novel. He was from New York, and they were in love when both were doing Master's work at Columbia University. In her words, "I did not just fall in love. I made a parachute jump" (252). Though it was, as she said, "the real love affair of my life" (255), his wish that she give up her career for him began an "agonizing tug of war" (256). It was partly to escape the "exquisite torture" (259) of this relationship that she accepted the research fellowship in the Caribbean. There, she explains, "I pitched in to work hard on my research to smother my feelings. But the thing would not down. The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God"'(260).

In short, *Their Eyes* was conceived in conditions certain to compromise even a far lesser novel's gestation. It was written in a hasty seven weeks, with little time for the ripening process of multiple drafting; it involved difficult emotional sortings out of a failed affair; and, presumably because of Hurston's marginal race and gender status, the J. B. Lippincott Company took her manuscript without requiring the rigorous redrafting of a conscientious editorial process.2 The result is a text tantalizing in excellent promise, fertilely ambivalent thinking, technical uncertainties, and latent self-contradictions. Had she let her novel mature more slowly, had she an opportunity to have it back, and had Lippincott asked for more substantive finishing, its final shape might have been quite different.

The text we now have is roughly equivalent to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, which was unfinished at his death but published, received, and assessed practically as if it were a finished novel. Some of that text's famed interpretive issues (is it a testament of resistance or acceptance?) might never have arisen if Melville had lived to give it full gestation. As it is, one can see Melville's brilliantly tentative probings of Billy, Claggart, and then Vere in that fascinating creative flux preceding final design, and therefore final coherence. Likewise, Hurston's text displays probings, discoveries, and tentative—even contradicting—critiques that resist shapely, formalist interpretive decodings. The current fashion is to fault formalist and patriarchal interpretive assumptions;3 yet while we now appreciate much in Hurston's project that we did not once see, significant technical and interpretive issues remain, and critics read *Their Eyes* in dramatically opposing ways.

At the heart of the text's self-contradictions, at the bedrock of Hurston's personality, was her extraordinary individualism, her self-reliant, at times adversarial, drive toward autonomy. This will toward independent self-realization illuminates why her love story is rooted in rejection of love, and why her romantic, racial folk immersion is at odds with the idea of personal happiness. In *Their Eyes,* the consequence of Hurston's personal individualism is that her thoughts unfold in polarities, through bedrock oppositions of self to community, and of female self to male control. As each gravitational pole tugs against the other, negating the opposite attraction even as the opposite negates it, her text is creatively enriched and complicated.

But for critics, one pole or the other tends to exert the stronger attraction. The result, as Jennifer Jordan astutely explains, is that "critics often view the text through ideological prisms that color their conclusions." In particular, Jordan cites black feminist critics who advocate "the unsupportable notion that the novel is an appropriate fictional representation of the concerns and attitudes of modern black feminism" (107). The text is in fact ambivalent, both a precursor to the modern feminist agenda yet also a reactionary tale embalming Hurston's tender passions for a very traditional male. Such tensions, born of Hurston's fast yet fertile creative process, give the novel considerable provocative power.

The issue of self and community arises in the novel's much discussed opening pages, as the heroine Janie returns home to Eatonville, Florida, much as Hurston returned to Eatonville, her birthplace, to gather folklore. Unlike Hurston, coming from New York to do elitist professional work, Janie returns in laborer's overalls, having previously wandered off with the gambling, drinking, fighting migrant laborer Tea Cake. Janie, formerly the staid, bourgeois wife of the town mayor, feels the community's eyes scrutinizing her in that prelude before their judgmental gossip. Thus both Ivy League Hurston and renegade Janie stand in ambiguous relationship to community, partly in it, yet partly outside and at odds with its provincial temperament.

How one interprets this homecoming depends on the critical strategems applied to the whole text. Molly Hite argues this is the "triumphal return" of a woman liberated from the heterosexual romantic model. In her view, Janie's maturing into her storytelling voice shows Hurston's intention to subvert and displace Janie and Tea Cake's love paradigm as a preliminary, transformative step toward a reconstituted social order empowering women. In a contrary view, Jennifer Jordan argues that Janie fails to achieve "an independent, self-fulfilled womanhood," never overcoming her passionate dependence on Tea Cake. So this cannot be a liberated heroine's triumphal return, in that Janie "has demonstrated no ability to survive alone" (113). Yet another view, advanced by Cyrena N. Pondrom, is that Tea Cake is modeled on mythic male gods of regeneration like Adonis and Osiris, which Hurston studied under Franz Boas at Columbia. Accordingly, when Janie says, "So Ah'm back home again and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah,"4 she will reintegrate the community not along feminist lines but by transmitting Tea Cake's "personal, unpossessive, mutually-affirming love" (197).

Clearly the novel's opening pages are crucial. They are part of the narrative's frame, occupying primarily the first and final chapters, in which Janie returns to her home after Tea Cake's tragic death and recounts her experiences to her friend Pheoby Watson, who in turn will relate them to the community. Here, if anywhere, the novel's coherence should reveal itself, as Janie's relationship to the community is reestablished, and the significance of her experiences is clarified. Instead, the text inspires remarkably diverse and antithetical readings. The problem, I have suggested, is that toward both Tea Cake and the Eatonville community Hurston is profoundly ambivalent because the privileging of her own autonomy undercuts some of the values the novel means to promote.

To be sure, *Their Eyes* was written to celebrate rural black folkways, which Hurston's anthropology training showed her had great cultural significance. As Hemenway explains, "Zora had come to think of herself as a woman with a mission: she would demonstrate that 'the greatest cultural wealth of the continent' lay in the Eatonvilles … of the black South" (113). Moreover, a chief tenet of the Harlem Renaissance was to speak for the folk masses, as Hurston learned when studying at Howard University under Alain Locke, who advocated that young black writers speak for the masses. Above all, *Their Eyes* was a return to Hurston's roots, because Boas and anthropology had prompted her to seek, in Hemenway's words, "a scientific explanation for why her own experience in the black rural South, despite all her education, remained the most vital part of her life, and why the black folk experience generally was the primary impetus for her imagination" (62–63).

Nonetheless, Hurston's personal ambition had taken her long ago from Eatonville to a wider, cosmopolitan, more educated world. At fourteen she left home alone, unhappy with her new stepmother. Then, with uncanny and resilient resourcefulness, she obtained college scholarships, wealthy Northern patrons, publications, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In this significant respect she parallels Janie, who tells Pheoby in Chapter 1, referring to Eatonville's townspeople: "Ah could … sit down and tell'em things. Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me" (6). Because they have never left, Janie implies, the folk of Eatonville haven't fully lived.

With her travels and training at Howard, Barnard, and Columbia, Hurston illustrates Thomas Wolfe's awareness that even if you look homeward, you can't entirely go home again. In *Dust Tracks* she humorously notes her alienation from the rural South when she first tried to collect folklore there, and failed: "The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me" (174). No longer a child of the South, she confesses: "I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, 'Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folksongs?' The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads," some of them suggesting evasively, "Maybe it was over in the next county" (175).

Various commentators have noted Hurston's ambivalent relationship to Eatonville. John D. Kalb aptly describes her status as that of anthropological participant-observer, which required her "to separate and disassociate herself from her community and culture" in order to comprehend it scientifically.5 Diane F. Sadoff, very perceptively examining Hurston's ambivalent "double perspective," states, "Hurston's record of return south covertly exposes her distance from her home" (19). Perhaps Hurston's own words, in *Mules and Men* (1935), best define her situation: "It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that" (3). In sum, Hurston stood with one foot in the folk community and the other in the wider world without, paralleling the very tension Janie feels in the frame chapters.

The novel's opening words, comparing people's dreams to "ships at a distance" that "sail forever on the horizon" (1), establish Janie as someone who has sailed to the horizon (much as Hurston had sailed to the Caribbean just before writing this narrative). The theme recurs in the closing chapter when Janie concludes, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back now. Ah kin set heah in my house and live by comparisons." The enlargement of Janie's mind is now clear: "Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along. It's full uh thoughts …" (182). If Janie implies her mind once was empty of the thoughts coming with growth experiences, Pheoby's response validates that: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo' " (182–183). Not so with the untraveled folk, who are disposed first to condemn rather than praise. Knowing this, Pheoby asserts, "Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin' "(183).

As they are described in Chapter 1, the town gossips reflect the obverse side of that rural folk spirit Hurston wants to preserve in anthropology and art. Insignificant toilers by day, at dusk "They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (1–2). Reflecting Hurston's ambivalence, they may be regal speakers in a dynamically oral folk culture, but their petty narrowness can be cruel with the "envy … they had stored up," so that now "they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty" (2).

Their remarks are withering, all the more depersonalized in that Hurston does not attach to them speaker attributions. "What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?" says one anonymous person. Another adds, "what dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?" Another asks, "why she don't stay in her class?—" (2). This class issue, reflecting a rigid belief that social definition is grounded in class status, is soon repeated: "She sits high, but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys" (3). At the very least there is ambivalence here, if not a latent contradiction. On the positive side, the Eatonville folk are fiercely equalitarian, assuming that since the lowest individual has worth equal to the socially privileged, anyone may stand on Jody Starks's store porch to speak his mind in lies, jokes, and verbal contests. This is indeed a significant element in the novel's antibourgeois argument. But more negatively, that individual aspiring to go too far above or beyond the communal circle is suspect.

Hurston's ambivalence is embedded in gender as well as class concerns.6 The envy of these women toward Janie clearly is as sexual as it is provincially social. Moreover, though the novel depicts the love between Janie and Tea Cake in highly lyrical terms, Hurston is well aware that if men can be gods they are also simply men: "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They … were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye" (2).

In this social context, no wonder Tea Cake prompts such disparate critical views. Putting behind her two disastrous marriages to possessively patriarchal men, Janie finds romantic love in Tea Cake because, in her view, "He was a glance from God" (102), a declaration at odds with anti-patriarchal criticisms of his character. Indeed, if separated from the frame chapters, the core love romance might seem less ambiguous than the whole text. But here in a very probing, ambivalent frame, men notice Janie's buttocks, hair, and breasts—her parts rather than her person. Later, it is difficult to reconcile the regenerative side of Tea Cake with what the author already has shown she knows of men.

This awkward yoking of frame to core narrative is both a flaw, in consequence of seven hasty weeks of composing, and partly a saving strength. As a flaw, it gives rise to the technical clumsiness of Janie's narrating her tale directly to Pheoby in the frame, the narration then shifting to third person in the core. It also manifests some of the text's unresolved contradictions, because in the frame Hurston's wavering between realistic and lyrical impulses is more pronounced than in the core.

Fortunately, Hurston's ambivalence checks her from excessive idealizing and gives the novel a significant and saving criticality. As Janie strides provocatively back into Eatonville, her hips and breasts so evident through her overalls, her hair swinging freely, she surely feels the strain of men's eyes boring at her in possessive desire and mounting resentment at her unavailability. "Yes," she would seem to say, "just as Zora I return to my roots, and here I will stay." "However," she would add, "my individual personhood is something that I now proudly assert." In the polar sexual and social tensions of Janie's situation lie much of the novel's complexity and provocative power. Nothing, not even Janie's romantic love, eludes Hurston's ambivalent impulses.

Latently, in Janie's love of Tea Cake are the same seeds of contradiction that Hurston describes in her love of Arthur Price. The crippling issue was not their age difference, she like Janie being the older, but that he, studying for the ministry, wanted her to be a supporting wife instead of independent career woman. So the relationship's problematic nature was, as Hemenway surmises, "its sense of ultimate impossibility" (231), which Hurston replicates in Tea Cake's fictionally arbitrary infection by rabies. Much as Hurston finally broke away from Price with her Caribbean fellowship, herself ending the love affair of her life, Janie shoots Tea Cake to death as he rabidly attacks and bites her. The plotting here is melodramatically gratuitous, much as the hurricane is that blows onto the Everglades to destroy Janie's happiness. That is because Hurston meant to embalm in Tea Cake only the "tenderness" of her passion for Price. If, presumably, she reserved her criticisms of him for husbands Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, then Tea Cake must die a Romeo-like innocent, destroyed by star-crossed natural forces rather than by character limitations. Yet, as commentators like to note, Tea Cake's murder suggests there is a snake in Janie's pastoral Eden, and the snake is man.

"He was the master kind. All, or nothing, for him," says Hurston of A.W.P. in *Dust Tracks* (257). In demanding she give up her career, he took a patriarchal protector's role that, curiously, she refused to criticize no matter the pain it produced. Once, when he resented her offer of a quarter for his fare home, his argument was: "He was a *man!* No woman on earth could either lend him or give him a cent…. Please let him be a *man!*" To which Hurston acquiesced in both principle and deed: "He had done a beautiful thing and I was killing it…. he wanted to do all the doing, and keep me on the receiving end. He soared in my respect from that moment on. Nor did he ever change. He meant to be the head, *so help him over the fence!*" Amazingly, though "That very manliness, sweet as it was, made us both suffer," she also loved him for it (253).

Similar qualities are evident in Tea Cake, despite the conspicuously egalitarian aspects of their relationship. When Janie jokes about his flattery of women, he responds biblically, "Ah'm de Apostle Paul tuh de Gentiles. Ah tells 'em and then agin Ah shows 'em" (100). He is quasi-divine, a "glance from God" who "seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps"; and "Spices hung about him" (101–102). If, as Janie asserts, "Dis is uh love game" (108), Tea Cake's role is at times traditionally very masculine. In an act of astounding male prerogative, he takes Janie's hidden two hundred dollars as she sleeps, leaves her in the hotel for a day and a night, blowing all but twelve dollars on a guitar and a party, at which "he stood in the door and paid all the ugly women two dollars not to come in" (117).

The next day, toting switch-blade and cards, he leaves again to win back Janie's money by gambling. For her part, Janie defends him rather than criticize: "She found herself angry at imaginary people who might try to criticize," because "Tea Cake had more good nature under his toe-nails than they had in their so-called Christian hearts" (120). When he returns with his winnings and two razor slashes, he closely echoes Arthur Price's sentiments: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman." Janie's reply is, "Dat's all right wid me." When he drifts into sleep, after she has tenderly nursed his wounds, she feels such a "self-crushing love" that "her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122).

With such incidents Hurston deliberately provokes the bourgeois reader, and her defense of Tea Cake here would be along class rather than feminist gender lines. Her point is that as Janie descends the socioeconomic ladder with a man who "ain't got doodly squat" (98), she is progressively liberated from the empty values of her earlier middle-class life. To borrow Hurston's phrase from *Dust Tracks,* the idyllic interlude with Tea Cake is Harlem Renaissance praise of the "raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down" (177).

On the other hand, for all his machismo Tea Cake exhibits some protofeminist qualities. In teaching Janie checkers and rifle shooting, in fishing with her, and allowing her out of the kitchen to be in the fields with him, he cuts the oppressive shackles that her first two husbands put on her. In sum, Tea Cake is a self-contradiction, partly a man's man, partly a women's advocate. He presents the same contradictions in love that Arthur Price did, who accepted and loved Hurston's intellectual parity,7 but who insisted on being her bread-winning protector.

These opposing polarities in Tea Cake's characterization remain unresolved. Only an arbitrary death by Janie's rifle ends them, and the reader is left pondering what his significance precisely is. One cannot know. In contrast to Killicks and Starks, he would seem unequivocally to be Janie's regenerative liberator. But in contrast with Janie's emerging independence, and with Hurston's own deepest needs for self-fulfillment, Tea Cake presents problems. Just as her own affair with Price was an ambivalent "exquisite torture," Janie's love of Tea Cake keeps her on tenterhooks: "She adored him and hated him at the same time. How could he make her suffer so and then come grinning like that with that darling way he had?" (103). Would Janie remain happy if tied to the seasonal cycles of grinding migrant work? Would she have money of her own that she could expect not to be taken? The novel ends conveniently before such issues arise to require resolution.

Hurston's characterization of Tea Cake is its most strained in the handling of his violence toward Janie. Irrationally fearful that Janie will be wooed away from him by Mrs. Turner's light skinned brother, Tea Cake gratuitously beats her, "Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession." No matter that he "just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss," his possessive jealousy is flatly incompatible with Janie's concurrent liberation (100). Earlier she rejected Logan and Jody for exactly such patriarchal prerogative. The chief difference here is that it is Tea Cake who controls her, and on the pedestal of their exclusive love this violence seems acceptable.

Hurston's confusion here stems in large part from an ideological shift from the feminist theme to the anti-bourgeois class critique. Tea Cake, an antibourgeois folk hero representing the raucous "Negro farthest down," has given Janie a marriage that is a medium of growth and mutuality. With his slapping Janie around, Hurston means to flaunt the stuffy elitism of her genteel middle-class readers. Indeed she very carefully precedes this episode with Janie's beating of Tea Cake first, because of her jealousy over Nunkie's interest in him; thus Janie exerts a sexual control equal to Tea Cake's. Likewise, Janie learns rifle shooting from Tea Cake and soon surpasses his skill. In the rough and tumble, give and take of this love, the reader is intended to focus foremost on Janie's developing self-reliance and egalitarian autonomy, even in conflictual moments.

But Hurston's folk romanticism founders here on the conflicting premises of her ideologies. Tea Cake's polarities—regenerative lover but slap-her-around plebeian—undermine plausibility even as they enrich the narrative with ambivalence. Further, Hurston's critiques are too hastily doctrinaire. For instance, in most male-on-female marital violence, women lack the power that Hurston gives to Janie. Richard Wright, who negatively reviewed the book, accused Hurston of a "facile sensuality" in which her depiction of "the Negro folk mind" is characterized by "pure simplicity" (25).8 His own writings present a completer picture of the racial, economic, and psychological determinants of male frustration and violence. *Their Eyes*, however, is "uh love game," and the text won't treat Tea Cake as it did Logan and Jody, as controlling men who enforced their wife's submission. Rather, in fellow migrant workers the beating of Janie "aroused a sort of envy in both men and women." In fact, Tea Cake's subsequent petting and pampering of her "made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams" (140).

In this episode, Janie's growing individualism fails to counterbalance grimmer American social realities, making life on the egalitarian Florida muck implausibly Edenesque. In the closing frame chapter, Pheoby declares, "Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this" (183). Pheoby's new autonomy is a response quite at odds with those admirers of Janie's helpless hanging on to Tea Cake. Indeed, Hurston herself finally refused to hang onto Arthur Price. She left for the Caribbean and the gains, both monetary and intellectual, of a self-fulfilling career. But she must have felt as if she had shot her man. In that respect, Janie's killing of Tea Cake is no more arbitrary than Hurston's painful, necessary insistence on her self-realization. Tea Cake's death is Hurston's vicarious revenge on Arthur Price, a concealed recognition of the snake in Hurston's southern folk Eden.9 At the end of the novel, her covert rage is displaced onto the fury of the hurricane, which brings with it a rabid dog and Tea Cake's inevitable doom.

*Their Eyes* is neither an evasively nostalgic, pastoral folk romance, nor is it wholly a feminist text. It is an ambivalent and contradictory text reflecting tensions Hurston felt both in love and in her rural South. Above all, it is powerfully provocative, as its admirers well know despite discomfort with its problems. To dismiss it out of hand, with formalist charges that it has evident flaws, is to deny its exciting and informing values. If *Their Eyes* were simply an unambiguous tragic romance, it would have only the power of a love lament for Arthur Price. If it were only an uncritical folk idealization of Eatonville, it would be romantic ethnography wedded to a Harlem Renaissance taste for fashionably exotic primitives.

What the novel does, while immersing one first in a woman's patriarchal oppression and then her lyrical love, as well as the richly felt life of a dynamic folk culture, is to probe these worlds with instinctively keen acumen. For Janie, Tea Cake is undeniably attractive and liberating, but beneath her love lurks a troubling unease. His polarities, rooted in Hurston's experience with men, give his idealized characterization a curious complexity, a submerged criticality that finds vent in his death. Neither anger alone nor love alone is Hurston's narrating motive. The anger is there, covertly, Sadoff perceptively states, as "the subterranean theme in Hurston's *Eyes* that women most truly become themselves without men" (22). But the love equally is there, the recognition in Tea Cake's loss that to privilege personal autonomy over heterosexual love is to suffer a stinging sacrifice.10 The contradictions of Eatonville, too, carry Hurston deeper than the cosmetics of nostalgia. Eatonville may be a world of racial and cultural vibrancy, but it can be mean to Janie once she has become an outsider. Hurston may have intended to celebrate Eatonville's richness, but from her probing comes an emergent, tentative critique of it as a paradise flawed and needing reconstruction.

Hurston is, then, an example of the Southerner who leaves the South and returns with ambivalent perspective, which in *Their Eyes* pulls in two contradictory directions, folk praise and criticism. In a word, Hurston's feet stood in two quite different soils. As Eatonville's representative to the North and the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston kept one foot planted proudly in the South. In this posture she was uncritical of her roots, her motive being to explain her culture—or flamboyantly to brag about it—to outsiders who were unaware of its values.

In this stance, she backdrops Eatonville's folkloric wealth in a luxuriant Southern Eden, which is presided over by tutelary god Vergible Tea Cake Woods. Tea Cake offers regenerative force. His first name is clearly vegetal in suggestion, and his last realizes the promise of Janie's teenage pear tree vision of organic harmony. In the end, a liberated Janie brings back his seeds to the village for its own regeneration in love. Eatonville, from Hurston's proud stance within her indigenous culture, is an implicit critique of a modern civilization that has lost important frontier, village, and folk values, and which has ignored the African-American cultural legacy. Indeed *Their Eyes* should have made Hurston's mentor Boas happy, for his anthropological efforts contained a similar, implied culture critique.

Surely, as Janie informs Pheoby of the stories, humor, signifying, and wisdom of the black village—things Pheoby need not be taught since she is immersed within them—Hurston is looking past Pheoby to the wider, Northern audience. Richard Wright astutely sensed this, accusing her of writing "to a white audience" for their mere entertainment (25). He feared the white response would be condescension toward—as he saw it—the story's simplistic pathos and laughter. He was correct in part, for the more celebratory, uncritical stance of *Their Eyes* is to convey an idyllic picture of racial wholeness to outsiders ignorant of it.

Yet this novel hardly whitewashes the South. That is because Hurston's other foot was in the North, and from this more alienated viewpoint Janie's arduous maturation seems threatened by snakes newly found in the garden. As Hemenway perceptively argues, Hurston discovered "one of the flaws in her early memories of the village: there had usually been only men telling lies on the front porch of Joe Clarke's store" (232). Logan Killicks, his first name suggesting low worth and a gun's violence, kills Janie's pear tree dream. Because his farm is like "a stump in the middle of the woods" (20), he is a truncation of love (and an antithesis to Tea Cake "Woods"). Subsequently, bourgeois Joe Starks brings only more anti-vegetal starkness to Janie's life. Finally, if there is blight in the garden, it would be expected that the liberating Tea Cake live; his death suggests Hurston instinctively sensed blight in him as well.

His contradictory characterization emerges from the conflicting feminist and class ideologies discussed earlier, as well as Hurston's divided rhetorical stance. In her more alienated posture, Hurston's critical aim is directed against her home, for most definitely she, a staunch individualist, had discontents with a culture blighted by patriarchal oppression and, behind that, racism. This theme is announced memorably by Janie's Nanny:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (19)

In this mode of address, illustrated by Janie's confiding only to Pheoby what the hostile villagers would resist accepting, Hurston cannot be wholly celebratory. From the alienation in this critical posture comes a destructive hurricane and Tea Cake's violent death, a recognition that personal happiness cannot be found in the garden. As Janie loves then shoots him, Hurston both loves and objects to her fallen, unregenerated paradise. Hastily composed and published, *Their Eyes* is a text of unfolding, unresolved ambivalences, a narrative begun perhaps as pastoral romance yet veering toward feminist resistance, a celebration of the low-down folk but a prickly critique of provincial mentality, a novel whose unresolved tensions reflect its remarkable creative intelligence. Hurston's ambivalent pull between praise and critique, while not always yielding a fully coherent text, should continue to compel with its inventive vigor, to cast its widening net around new readers.

Ramsey, William M. "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Southern Literary Journal* 27, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 36–50. Quoted as "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2008. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=MCVZNH005&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

***Their Eyes Were Watching God***

**Date:** 1937  
**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston  
**From:** *The Novel 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novels of All Time*, Revised Edition.

Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for perhaps the eleventh time, I am still amazed that Hurston wrote it in seven weeks; that it speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done; and that the language of the characters, that "comical nigger 'dialect' " that has been laughed at, denied, ignored, or "improved" so that white folks and educated black folks can understand it, is simply beautiful. There is enough self-love in that one book—love of community, culture, traditions—to restore a world. Or create a new one.

—Alice Walker, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing … And Then Again*

*When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*

With the exception of Herman Melville's literary resurrection, there is no more impressive reclamation of a writer's reputation in American literature than that of Zora Neale Hurston and the concurrent recognition of her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Along with the rediscovery and canonization of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* no other American novels have risen so far from obscurity. Few college courses on African-American literature, women's literature, or 20th-century American literature fail to include Hurston's novel. It has earned the distinction, as Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway summarizes, "as one of the most poetic works of fiction by a black writer in the first half of the twentieth century, and one of the most revealing treatments in modern literature of a woman's quest for a satisfying life." The novel's protagonist, Janie Crawford, has joined a select group of emblematic American heroines that includes Hawthorne's Hester Pyrnne, James's Isabel Archer, and Dreiser's Carrie Meeber. However, Janie Crawford is the first great black woman protagonist in American literature, and her story, along with the techniques used in its telling, would prove to be a fountainhead for subsequent novelists such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and many others who have followed Hurston's example in giving voice to African-American experience from the long-overlooked woman's perspective.

A central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston was an innovator, a provocateur, and a contrarian. She was a pioneer in recording and incorporating black folktales and traditions into her work, invigorating American writing, as Twain had done earlier, with the power and expressiveness of the vernacular. Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-black community in the United States. Her father was the town's mayor and a Baptist preacher. The town's vibrant folk tradition with its frequent "lying" sessions of tall tales stimulated Hurston's anthropological and creative interests. When her mother died and her father remarried, Hurston was passed around from boarding school to friends and relatives. At 16 she worked as a wardrobe girl for a traveling light-opera troupe. She quit the show in Baltimore and went to work as a maid for a white woman who arranged for her to attend high school.

From 1918 to 1924, Hurston studied part time at Howard University in Washington, D.C., while working as a manicurist. Her first writing appeared in the African-American magazine *Opportunity,* whose founder, Charles Johnson, encouraged her to come to New York City to develop her writing and to finish her college degree. While studying anthropology at Barnard College, Hurston wrote poetry, plays, articles, and stories, and in 1925 received several awards given by *Opportunity* to promising black writers. She went on to study with the eminent cultural anthropologist Franz Boas and conducted field research in Eatonville, Haiti, and Jamaica, which was incorporated in two important folklore collections, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* appeared in 1934, and her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* in 1937. Two final novels—*Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)—along with her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), failed to halt a declining reputation, and her later years were spent in extreme poverty and obscurity. She worked for a time as a maid and a librarian before dying as an indigent, buried in an unmarked grave.

A complex woman, Hurston is described by Hemenway as "flamboyant yet vulnerable, self-centered yet kind, a Republican conservative and an early black nationalist." Some African-American critics reacted to her ideological independence and contrariness by complaining that the folk elements in her work were demeaning and one-dimensional. Seeking acceptance by mainstream literary standards, other black writers feared that Hurston's evocation of rural black experience marginalized and diminished wider acceptance of African Americans. Richard Wright dismissed her work as outside the central protest tradition that he insisted serious black literature should embrace. Reviewing *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Wright ridiculed the novel as a "minstrel-show turn that makes the 'white folks' laugh" and could detect in Hurston "no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction." Even Ralph Ellison, in whom many subsequent critics have detected influences from Hurston in the expressionistic, folk-rich, black-comic makeup of *Invisible Man,* complained about Hurston's "blight of calculated burlesque." Few initially credited Hurston's work as a major source of poetic and intellectual strength. However, as critic Judith Wilson has observed, Hurston "had figured out something that no other black author of her time seems to have known or appreciated so well—that our homespun vernacular and streetcorner cosmology are as valuable as the grammar and philosophy of white, Western culture." It would take the women's movement of the 1970s and the particular advocacy of writer Alice Walker to cause readers and critics to look again at Hurston's achievement in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and to recognize it finally as a complex and controversial, groundbreaking work combining central issues of race, gender, and class in ways that had never previously been attempted in American literature. It is a novel that continues to stir controversy and has successfully resisted relegation to a narrow critical niche, whether as an exclusively feminist or racial text.

Hurston wrote her second novel in 1936, when she was in Haiti doing fieldwork for her second folklore collection. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, therefore, suffused with the exoticism of the Caribbean setting, transposed to the American landscape of Hurston's youth. Hurston identified the central impetus in writing the novel as the failed love affair she had had in 1931 with a younger West Indian student, in which she attempted to capture the "emotional essence of a love affair between an older woman and a younger man." The novel is patterned by Janie Crawford's quest for identity, by her search to transcend the restrictions imposed by others as well as the seemingly immutable laws of gender, economics, and race in the discovery of her authentic self. As the novel opens, Janie has returned to her all-black Florida community after having buried her younger lover, Tea Cake Woods, and after going on trial for his murder. She is an affront to the black community. Forty years old, she wears her hair swinging down her back like a much younger woman. A woman of means, she dresses as a man in muddy overalls. She is relegated by the community's scorn to typicality: an older woman who should know better, undoubtedly abandoned by her younger lover, returning home in shame. Nothing could be further from the truth, and Janie confesses her full story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson, chronicling her three marriages and the stages of her development that she has accomplished.

Janie's story begins with her teenage sexual awakening, prompted by her noticing the organic process of bees pollinating a pear tree. The image suggests to Janie an exalted natural concept of marriage and the beginning of her quest for a human equivalent. "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom!" she exclaims. "With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her?" Her vitalism and desire for expansion will be countered by the restrictions of others with a very different concept of a woman's place and marriage. Janie's poetry will be translated into other's prose; her sense of spirit into hard, material facts. Janie's grandmother, a former slave, imposes on her granddaughter a marriage of security with an aging farmer, Logan Killicks, to prevent Janie becoming "de mule uh de world," the inevitable fate of the unprotected black female. However, that is precisely what Janie becomes as Mrs. Killicks, property to serve her husband's economic ambition, destined to drive a second mule and enhance his acquisitiveness. Instead, Janie runs away with the similarly restless and ambitious Jody Starks, heading to the newly formed black community of Eatonville to make his fortune. Although Janie recognizes that Jody "did not represent sun up and pollen and blooming trees," he "spoke for far horizon," of expansive opportunity compared to her restricted fate as Killicks's drudge. Jody pampers his "lady-wife" with new clothes and luxuries while restricting her direct involvement in the black community that he begins to dominate. Starks desires not a mule but a "doll-baby," a precious ornament to be admired as a sign of his distinction and power. Their marriage eventually collapses, shifting its locus from the bedroom to the parlor. Locked in a stagnant existence in which she "got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value," Janie gains her liberation following Starks's death when Tea Cake Woods, 18 years her junior, comes into her life.

Tea Cake, a musician and a gambler, totally absorbed in the present, is indifferent to social conventions. Unlike Janie's first two lovers, he is also free from their class consciousness and gender notions, uninterested in her inherited fortune from Starks and unconcerned by their age difference. Tea Cake is "a bee for her bloom," making Janie feel alive, vital, truly offering the unlimited horizon that Starks once promised. Tea Cake loves her for what she is, neither a mule nor a doll-baby but an autonomous equal, and thus Janie is reborn. Their life together defies conventions of age and class, and the first lady of Eatonville dons overalls to go "on the muck" into the primitive depths of the Florida Everglades for the bean-picking season. As critic Mary Helen Washington has observed, "Here, finally, was a woman on a quest for her own identity and, unlike so many other questing figures in black literature, her journey would take her, not away from, but deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, and communal life representing immersion into black traditions." Their lyrical, pastoral honeymoon there does not come unalloyed with threat. Tea Cake fears that Janie will abandon him for a lighter-skinned rival, and the couple is crucially tested in a hurricane. Here Hurston explains the significance of the novel's title as the hurricane suggests a sign of God's intention that must be anticipated and interpreted, an existential moment that forces self-definition. During the storm, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while trying to save Janie's life. In his subsequent derangement, his jealousy overpowers him, and he tries to shoot Janie, who kills him in self-defense. Forced to kill the one man she truly loves, Janie is pressed to an ultimate test, like the hurricane, that demands understanding. As a key passage in the novel makes clear, the incident, though painful, makes a crucial spiritual point: "All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear, and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood."

Janie's story has now cycled back to the novel's beginning, to her return to Eatonville. Janie confesses to her friend, "So Ah'm back home agin and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparison." By embracing the intensification, the immersion in experience that Tea Cake afforded her, Janie Crawford has fashioned a self-determined identity, one more organic, expansive, and vital than that prescribed by race, gender, or class. As Janie explains in her final declaration, "It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out livin' fuh theyselves."

Janie has moved from dependence to self-reliance largely through embracing experience, by not settling for the commonly imposed definition of possibility, whether as an African American or as a woman. At its thematic core, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* pushes the concept of race beyond the narrower range of equity and tolerance, protest and prejudice, into a much more expanded celebration of essential humanity that dissolves established distinctions. The conventional dichotomies of male/female, white/black, rich/poor are shown to have no real sway in the lyrical, spiritualized consciousness of Hurston's novel—hence the novel's power and its undiminished capacity to unsettle and challenge.

Burt, Daniel S. "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The Novel 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novels of All Time*, Revised Edition. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2010. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=NOVLR088&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### "Some Other Way to Try": From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 2004  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** Shawn E. Miller  
**From:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Bloom's Guides.

Of course, the book does not leave Janie and Tea Cake together on the muck, and any evaluation must take account of the hurricane, Tea Cake's madness, and his death by Janie's hand. Hurston has left many wondering why this marriage must end in such a violent way, and here again conventional assumptions have caused confusion. Following her interpretation of the book as literary romance, Janice Daniel sees the hurricane as the "requisite 'dragon' of [ Janie's] romance quest" (72). Lupton cites this final action sequence as part of her reading of the novel in terms of evolutionary theory; under stress from the natural world, a woman has been selected as the fittest over a man (53–54). Carla Kaplan asserts that Tea Cake's death is required by the narrative logic of the novel, liberating Janie "to continue her quest and, ultimately, to satisfy her 'oldest human longing—self-revelation' with someone who *can* listen [Pheoby]" (132). Here again, Hurston comes under fire from skeptics. Ramsey, who describes Janie's life on the muck as "implausibly Edenesque" (46), calls the hurricane "melodramatically gratuitous," Tea Cake's infection by rabies "fictionally arbitrary" (43), and concludes finally that Tea Cake's death is yet another mark of weakness, a way to duck several important questions: "Would Janie remain happy if tied to the seasonal cycles of grinding migrant work? Would she have money of her own that she could expect not to be taken? The novel ends conveniently before such issues arise to require resolution" (45). Even Urgo calls the novel's final sequence "wildly audacious" (53), fashioning a compliment out of the same material of Ramsey's accusation.

Recently, some have been content to label the hurricane mere plot device, and a derivative one at that, which serves solely to rid Janie of Tea Cake (or, according to Ramsey, to enact Hurston's revenge fantasy against the man she loved [46]) and titillate the reader (Lillios 91–92), but which is in any case insufficiently integrated with the novel's thematic concerns. Assuredly, the hurricane does function in these ways, but it is also more relevant to Hurston's themes than many have been willing to admit. It fits a pattern of incidents in which characters are powerless to overcome external obstacles by main force; survival depends on a careful understanding of the variables which can be controlled and those which cannot. A failed assessment leaves characters wholly at the mercy of fortune, as Motor Boat and Dick Sterrett are at the mercy of the hurricane. Other incidents fitting this pattern include Nanny's slavery experiences, Starks's bout with Death, Tea Cake's rabies, and Janie's trial. In some instances (as with Nanny and Motor Boat), fortune works in the character's favor; in others (as with Starks, Tea Cake, and Sterrett), fortune works against him, regardless of the dictates of cosmic justice. Janie's quest, if we accept that she is too weak to reverse single-handedly the sex role she is expected to play, also fits this pattern, a connection strengthened by her objective both in the quest and in escaping the hurricane waters. In both instances, Janie wishes to reach the high ground.

And here again, as with the technique of third-person narration, we must ask ourselves what the hurricane's aftermath allows Hurston to do that she otherwise could not. First, it allows her to dramatize in extreme fashion Janie's continued use of submission to control Tea Cake. During his bout with rabies, Janie never fails to answer Tea Cake's increasingly wild accusations and assertions of masculine privilege with pacifying submission: "All right, Tea Cake, jus' as you say" (172). Until the disease consumes him, her abject obedience still makes Tea Cake cry and feel ashamed of himself (171). Janie continues with her strategy of pacification to the verge of oblivion, but here Hurston is able to draw the line where submission must end; only after Tea Cake's pistol has twice clicked on an empty chamber does Janie, for the first time in their relationship, dare to command him: "Tea Cake, put down dat gun and go back tuh bed!" (175). Once Janie sees that her submission no longer functions to make her husband as she wishes him to be, she abandons the strategy entirely, shooting him with the rifle rather than follow him into death. But Janie's role-playing continues to serve her purposes, as it allows the judge in her trial to portray her as "a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy" (179).

These events also allow Hurston to portray Janie without Tea Cake, and to re-emphasize that her happiness depends not on Tea Cake as he is, but on the Tea Cake of her dreams. As the novel comes to an end, and as Janie reflects on the sadness of what she has gone through, suddenly a vision of Tea Cake appears:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was … Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. (183–184)

The man Janie met in the store is dead, but the man whom she herself has fashioned out of his raw material still lives. Here Hurston brings the exposition of her novel full-circle; Janie is one of the women who "forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth" (1). This ability to fashion truth out of dreams regardless of temporal reality is what gives women like Janie their power; they are not like the pitiable men whose dreams are "mocked to death by Time" (1). Nanny, who envisions a ruling chair for Janie, has sought a future for her granddaughter where the substance of life accords with her dream of it. But, just as the ruling chair has been by custom reserved for men, so this insistence on the correspondence of dream and reality puts Janie's happiness in the hands of fortune, which Hurston notes is the predicament of the male "Watcher" of the horizon (1). Only when Janie gives up this insistence, only when she removes the fighting spirit from her soul to focus on achieving her dream through submission, is she able to become self-reliant; the reality of Tea Cake's domination of her becomes irrelevant, and so, finally, does his physical death, for despite these inconsistencies, Janie is able to make her husband into a dream-figure to serve her own needs.

## Conclusion

I may here seem to portray a coldly calculating Janie, and to diminish the love she and Tea Cake share. Anyone who has read the book might protest, and rightly so, that there is no evidence for this characterization of Janie, no evidence that her love for Tea Cake and his love for her are anything but genuine. I agree with Alice Walker when she claims *Their Eyes Were Watching God* constitutes "one of the sexiest, most 'healthily' rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature" ("Zora" 17). I have not set out to challenge this claim; rather, the questions before me have been why this final marriage allows the survival of love, and why the first two do not. That traditionally-conceived sex roles are love-defeating in Janie's first two marriages is obvious; why they are not love-defeating in her third is questionable, as I have suggested. Perhaps, in answering Richard Wright's early criticisms of the book, we have been too tempted to discover the social protest he missed; Janie must therefore be the questing feminist who finds her own voice and autonomy in a marriage to a man who will allow her to actualize herself. Evidence from the text, however, suggests that Tea Cake is no such man. Further, it is unreasonable to expect him to be: he is a southern, working-class, uneducated wanderer much more likely to be within the traditional ideology of marriage prevalent in rural, early twentieth-century America. One must assume that he is not conversant with more enlightened ideas of marriage, which were necessarily unavailable to illiterate men, not to mention undesirable to them, until much later in the century. Janie, who is incapable of single-handedly unmaking conventional marriage, must find a way to appropriate it in order to achieve her own ends. She is not responsible for externally-imposed sex roles, nor should we interpret her submission to them as whole-hearted consent to their justice; however, she has learned in her first marriages that defiance, though just, though heroic, is quixotic if not wholly disastrous. Janie's purposes, which I would suggest tend much more toward love than toward autonomy anyway, are served only when she appeals to the force of contract within conventional marriage. She achieves both self-reliance and love in spite of, not through, her third husband.

Once we adjust certain of our long-held assumptions to account for evidence they cannot explain, we are left with a well-wrought text capable of sustaining close reading. We do not have to gloss over "inconsistency" or "ambivalence" to see Janie for the heroine she is, nor do we have to resort to strained explanations that flatter our own sensibilities. This novel is clearly not the straightforward critique of gender and power in marriage that some critics claim it is, but neither is it the flawed, unfinished work of an exhausted and emotionally conflicted Zora Neale Hurston, as Ramsey claims. If we let go of our assumptions of Tea Cake as liberator, of Killicks and Starks as villains, of Janie as the unchanging feminist hero, this text is capable of answering consistently each of our questions and concerns about it. Further, we are left with a reading capable of satisfying the advocates and gate-keepers alike. Janie does not have to remain unchanged and defiant for us to recognize her covert feminism, just as other apparently subservient characters throughout the African-American tradition do not have to defy their white masters for us to recognize their achievement of power despite an imposed racial hierarchy. Neither must we elect this book to the canon with a wink and a nudge, for charges of textual weakness, as I hope I have shown, are due to our own mistaken assumptions and not to Hurston's shoddy craftsmanship. Though one must agree with Urgo that "there is no longer any need to argue the importance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to American literature" (41–42), it would be best to stop coddling it. The best argument for this change in attitude is the text itself, for Hurston here demonstrates that her book has need of no one's patronage.

Miller, Shawn E. "'Some Other Way to Try': From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Southern Literary Journal* (2004): 74–95. Quoted as "'Some Other Way to Try': From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=BGTEWWG018&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### Mink Skin or Coon Hide: The Janus-Faced Narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 1999  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** Susan Edwards Meisenhelder  
**From:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations.

As in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston also focused on "family matters" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, examining in greater detail models of black male and female identity and the larger social worlds they both reflect and shape. Echoing John Pearson, Bentley, and Muttsy in her depiction of Janie's husbands, she critiques a false model of masculinity drawn from a white world and the notion of black female identity it assumes. As suggested in the allusions to the two-faced Janus figure Hurston exploits in her delineation of Janie, Janie struggles between two identities in the novel, one like Pinkie's drawn from the white world and foisted upon her and a more vigorous model of black womanhood she tries to forge for herself.1 The discursive difficulties Hurston faced in telling this story were perhaps even greater than those she faced in writing *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, for the powerful black woman Janie becomes resists oppression not merely by haunting her husband after her death as Lucy does, but much more directly, "killing" one man with words and another with a gun. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston cloaks this more daring expose of female resistance in lush naturalistic imagery and rich folk idiom to create a novel in which racial and sexual conflict was so carefully masked that it was read by most of her contemporaries (as she fully expected) as one merely celebrating the spontaneous primitivism of black life.2

The novel's rich metaphors, many of which Hurston developed in revision of the novel's manuscript, emphasize both race and gender in Janie's struggle for self-fulfillment. Certainly the most explicit reference in the novel to their interaction in the lives of black women is Nanny's speech to Janie before her first marriage:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (29)3

Drawing her model of black female identity from her own experience with the harshest forms of racial and sexual oppression (slavery and rape), Nanny is both accurate in her assessment of the world "where the white man is the ruler" (as many incidents in *Mules and Men* suggest) and limited in her conception of alternatives. Accepting the hierarchies and inequalities of her world as universal and immutable, she hopes to save Janie from becoming either a mule or a "spit-cup" (37) by placing her under the "big protection" (41) of an economically secure husband. Unable to imagine a world where black woman and mule are not synonymous, she embraces an ideal that from her experience seems the only alternative, one drawn from a romanticized conception of the lives of white women. Although Janie's first two marriages show the limitations of Nanny's understanding, detailing both the enervating effects of "settin' on porches lak de white madam" (172) as well as the many ways women can be spit-cups and mules with male protection, Nanny's mule metaphor is, nevertheless, a very complicated piece of social commentary, more accurate in its analysis of race and gender in a world where "de white man is de ruler" than the young Janie realizes. As the rest of the novel will reveal, in a community ruled by whites or their black surrogates, race and gender interact in complicated ways, creating artificial status and power differences between black men and women.4

Although Nanny cannot imagine a world free of hierarchy and domination, such a vision is expressed in Janie's metaphor of the pear tree, itself a densely complex social metaphor:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (24–25)

On one level, an obvious metaphor for sexual relationships, the passage is a powerful contrast to Nanny's spit-cup and mule metaphors with their suggestions of rape and female dehumanization. Echoing the male/female equality extolled in the "Behold the Rib!" sermon of *Mules and Men*, this metaphor for sexuality is one free of domination and active/passive polarities: there is no suggestion of rapacious violence on the part of the (male) bees who "sink into the sanctum of a bloom" or of passive victimization on the part of the "sister-calyxes [who] arch to meet the love embrace." The sexual relationship imaged here, one between active equals, is not only one of sexual fulfillment and "delight" but, as the metaphor of pollination implies, one of creativity and fecundity.5

Casting this metaphor in naturalistic and mythic terms seemingly unrelated to race, Hurston further masks its import by assigning it a domestic referent, marriage. Although she does not identify her metaphor as in any way racially specific, it forms a part of a larger pattern of tree imagery developed in the novel to describe black identity. In contrast to those characters whose lives have been largely shaped in a white-dominated world and who are described as mutilated trees (Nanny [26], her daughter, and Killicks [39], for instance), only Tea Cake—with Woods for a last name—and Janie, who at the chronological end of the novel sees her life "like a great tree in leaf" (20), experience the kind of relationship imaged in the pear tree and appear as the racially and sexually vibrant, "undiminished human beings" (85) described by Alice Walker. As their relationship and experience on the Muck suggests, the kind of relationship imaged here—sexual or more broadly social—cannot flourish in a world of hierarchy and domination. Only possible where the white man is not the ruler of black people's lives, the pear tree images the model of relationships necessary for black vitality—male *and* female. The novel, in large measure, chronicles the struggle between the racial and sexual identities packed into Janie's and Nanny's metaphors. Although the novel will reveal complications in both, the options facing Janie are clear early in the novel: to live as the mule or imitation white woman implied in Nanny's vision or as the vigorous black one imaged in her own.

The difficulties Janie will experience trying to become such a woman married to Joe Starks are clear from the very beginning of their relationship, for Hurston is careful in almost every detail of his character to paint him as a false model of black manhood, one like John's drawn from white world. As deeply influenced as Nanny by the experience of "workin' for white folks all his life" (47) and as committed to the underlying dynamics of her social metaphor and the multilayered hierarchy on which it rests, he strives simply to usurp the white man's place at the top of the social ladder. Aware from his own experience that "de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else" (48), he moves to the all-black community of Eatonville, where, as "a big voice" (48), he can play the white man's role, tossing his load to the black men beneath him and the black women beneath them. As Hurston shows, Starks's attempt to emulate whites—even Janie immediately notices that he looks (56) and acts (49) like white men—ultimately shapes his relationship with his community and with his wife.6 Forfeiting the possibility of healthy black relationships imaged in the pear tree, he becomes sexually dead and socially isolated, elevated above but alienated from other black people, an observer rather than a participant in the porch-front banter and cultural life of his community. No representative of "sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (50), his big voice takes the "bloom off things" (69), leaving him a tree as starkly denuded as Killicks' stump.

Starks's desire to imitate white men and its effect on his relationship with the people in Eatonville is evident in the objects with which he surrounds himself. To go with his desk (one "like Mr. Hill or Mr. Galloway over in Maitland" [75] owns), he buys a fancy gold spittoon "just like his used-to-be bossman used to have" (75) that symbolizes for him his sophistication and status above the common people. In addition to humorously spoofing white pretensions here (this is, after all, a spit-cup despite its price tag), Hurston emphasizes the damaging effects of Starks's finery on the black people around him. Just as Starks behind his desk "weakened people" (76), his spittoon makes them question their own identity: "how could they know up-to-date folks was spitting in flowery little things like that? It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them, when they wasn't told no better than to spit in tomato cans" (76). Whereas the community members are awed and intimidated by Starks, they sense something unnatural in his actions: "It was bad enough for white people [to act like he did], but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not" (76). Paradoxically, both Starks's and the community's sense of identity are damaged with the purchase of this spittoon, for he (as the people recognize) becomes a freakish hybrid, neither black nor white.

When he comes to town, Starks also brings with him white definitions of leadership and power. He inadvertently reveals his plans when he arrives, responding in telling astonishment to an announcement that the town has no mayor: "'Ain't got no Mayor! Well, who tells ya'll what to do?'" (57). Whereas Starks sees himself as a "leader" who brings order and progress to the community, Hurston suggests a more sinister motive: he plans to control the town like his former "boss-men," a fact evident when he immediately puts the men to work cutting trees. Talking like a "section foreman" (58) with "bow-down command" (75) in his face, Starks recreates power dynamics of the most oppressive sort, a fact recognized by the residents themselves, who, when forced by Starks to dig ditches, "murmured hotly about slavery being over" (75). Significantly, he builds for himself a slave owner's mansion to symbolize his power over the community and installs the light post in imitation of the white god he worships.7

Just as Starks draws his model for social relationships from the white world, his view of the ideal relationship between a man and a woman is similarly imported. Vowing to place Janie on "de front porch" so she can "rock and fan [herself] and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for [her"] (49), Starks promises only a modification rather than an abolition of Nanny's hierarchy. While Janie will be above "the gang," she will be subjugated and objectified in her relationship with Joe: her pedestal will place her above other black women, but decidedly beneath him. Nanny, thus, fails to recognize the complexity of her own "mule" metaphor, for merely replacing a white man's face with a black one does not free Janie. Ironically, she lives a life Nanny worked so hard to avoid for her, enduring what Nanny feared despite having attained the economic circumstances she desired. Although in more complex ways than the literal rape Nanny feared, Janie becomes a spit-cup for Joe, her passive status exemplified in the spittoon he gives her. "A little lady-size spitting pot" (smaller, of course, than Joe's) with "little sprigs of flowers painted all around the sides" (76) in seeming contrast to its earthy function, the fancy spitting pot symbolizes the deceptive appearance of Janie's relationship with Starks. Although Janie, like white women, ostensibly lives on "a flowery-bed-of-ease" (*Mules and Men* 85) with Joe, this veneer of economic affluence and elevated class status relative to other blacks only thinly covers the degradation she experiences.8

As other critics have pointed out, Janie also becomes a mule in her relationship with Starks, a parallel Hurston buries in the anomalous, "comic" story of Matt Bonner's mule.9 Underneath what appears merely a playful depiction of folk life and the richness of storefront banter, Hurston reveals that Jody's "noble" (91) behavior toward the mule is very much like his "solicitous" treatment of Janie; his motivation in pampering both mules is simply to elevate himself in the community, and in both cases, his "kindness" is deadly. Just as Joe's "solicitation" spiritually strangles Janie, Hurston also ironically suggests that Starks's munificence kills the mule, for the mule dies in a way that "wasn't natural and … didn't look right" (93) after Jody begins the practice of piling up fodder for it (92). The suggestion that the mule dies from over-feeding is reinforced in the later anomalous section depicting the buzzards coming to feed on the mule's carcass. In their declaration that "Bare, bare fat" (97) has killed the mule, we see the double paradox in Starks's behavior: the mule dies from his cruel kindness just as surely as Janie is spiritually starved by his poor, poor wealth.

The broader treatment of the black woman as mule is further reinforced in this chapter through the story of Mrs. Tony Robbins, the woman who comes to beg food from Joe Starks. Like the yellow mule episode and many episodes in *Mules and Men*, this scene (judging from the male characters' reactions) seems also simply a lighthearted interlude with Mrs. Robbins as easy a target for scorn as Matt Bonner. Just as Jody and the town men enjoy "mule-baiting" and teasing Matt Bonner (89), Joe relishes "baiting" (113) and "jok[ing] roughly" (113) with the woman when she comes to the store. Significantly, Joe Stark' responds to her hunger with the same penury Matt Bonner did to his mule's. Like Bonner who only fed his mule with a teacup (83) and "was known to buy side-meat by the slice" (88), Jody stingily cuts off a tiny slab of meat for Mrs. Robbins (115), not forgetting, of course, to charge it to her husband's account. In fact, the yellow mule is finally treated more generously than Mrs. Robbins. In a telling comment on the fate of women who do not passively accept their status as mules, the men on the porch-front respond to Mrs. Robbins's complaint that her husband does not feed her with violent wrath, one vowing "Ah'd kill her cemetery dead" (115–16) and another saying "Ah'd kill uh baby just born dis mawnin' fuh uh thing lak dat."10

In ways that would undoubtedly have surprised Nanny, Janie thus finds herself in a world of "mules and men" married to Joe; and for much of their relationship, she accepts her status. Like the "fractious" mules celebrated in *Mules and Men*, however, she increasingly resists his control, speaking out in Big Sweet fashion first for the yellow mule, then for Mrs. Turner, and finally for herself. In her famous rejoinder to Starks's public humiliation of her, she breaks out of Nanny's hierarchy, refusing to be the mule and deflating the pretensions of the man who has made her one: "'You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'" (123).11

Janie's equations here are significant ones reminding us how completely Jody's identity—his big belly, which makes him "Kind of portly like rich white folks" (56), and his "big voice"—is drawn from the white world. As Janie's final allusion to sexual impotence suggests, it is an empty model of male identity, for Joe's illusions of masculinity and power are immediately destroyed when Janie refuses to play her supporting role. Hurston's description of Starks's lingering illness further suggests the emptiness of white models of manhood, for Jody is almost literally deflated by Janie's comments, gradually losing weight until even his big belly is only a saggy remnant of his former grandeur, "A sack of flabby something [that] hung from his loins and rested on his thighs when he sat down" (126).

In every respect, Tea Cake Vergible Woods is portrayed as Starks's antithesis, his feminized nickname promising a "sweeter," gentler kind of masculinity and his surname a healthy black identity compared to the sterility implied in Joe's. Hurston stresses this contrast by painting Tea Cake as emphatically black and by detailing his defiance of the hierarchical values Starks imports from the dominant white culture. He also repeatedly rejects the definition of male/female relationships that Joe had internalized and forced on Janie. In teaching Janie to play checkers, to shoot, to drive, and in inviting her to work alongside of him, Tea Cake breaks down the rigid gender definitions Joe sought to impose, bringing Janie into the cultural life of the black community and building a relationship with her grounded in reciprocity rather than hierarchy. Unlike Starks, who uses language to intimidate, dominate, and silence Janie, Tea Cake encourages her to voice her own feelings honestly, to "'Have de nerve tuh say whut you mean'" (165). His belief in the legitimacy of black women's self-expression is evident in his courting behavior, which contrasts sharply with the other male courting rituals and "mule talk" described in Chapter Six. When Jim and Dave engage in their love talk, Daisy is merely a silent and passive vehicle for them "to act out their rivalry" (107). As they vie with one another for the most hyperbolic sign of their devotion, promising to give her passenger trains and steamships, the male audience for their performance explodes in "A big burst of laughter at Daisy's discomfiture" (107).12 Tea Cake, on the other hand, brings Janie into his game as an active participant. When Janie gases him for his generous purchase of two Coca-Colas with the comment, "'We got a rich man round here, then. Buyin' passenger trains uh battleships this week?'" (153), Tea Cake addresses his love talk to Janie rather than the other male in the store: "'Which one do *you* want? It all depends on you'" (153). That invitation initiates the first instance in the novel of a man and woman engaged in the kind of playful discourse normally reserved for males:

"Oh, if you'se treatin' me tuh it, Ah b'lieve Ah'll take de passenger train. If it blow up Ah'll still be on land."

"Choose de battleship if dat's whut you really want. Ah know where one is right now. Seen one round Key West de other day."

"How you gointuh git it?"

"Ah shucks, dem Admirals is always ole folks. Can't no ole man stop me from gittin' no ship for yuh if dat's what you want. Ah'd git dat ship out from under him so slick till he'd be walkin' de water lak ole Peter befo' he knowed it." (153–54)

As this evidence of Tea Cake's belief in linguistic reciprocity suggests, Janie is right that Tea Cake teaches her "the maiden language," for he is the first man who has not wanted to make her a spit-cup for his words.

Tea Cake's fundamental defiance of the dominant culture's notions concerning both race *and* sex and his rejection of the oppressive hierarchies that typify a world of mules and men make him "a bee to [Janie's] blossom" (161). In every aspect of their early relationship, he represents the model of masculinity imaged in the bee, encouraging Janie to express the equality and activity expressed in the blossom. Tea Cake's brand of masculinity and the kind of reciprocal relationship it makes possible are imaged early when Janie falls asleep and wakens to find Tea Cake combing her hair. Unlike Starks who asserts his oppressive masculinity, controlling Janie's sexuality by forcing her to bind up her hair, Tea Cake here not only engages in a traditional female activity but also luxuriates in the freedom her hair represents. Whereas Starks sees Janie's hair as a symbol of his control of her, Tea Cake combs Janie's hair in the spirit of reciprocity that characterizes their early relationship, experiencing pleasure in giving it (157). Ready to accept Janie as the person she is rather than attempting to remold her to his desires, he not only combs her beautiful hair but also "scratch[es] the dandruff from her scalp" (156). With such a "bee-man," Janie becomes "petal-open," and the union of bee and blossom that results is, as Janie realizes, the real "beginning of things" (163), a profoundly creative moment contrasting sharply with Starks's parody of Creation.

As Cynthia Pondrom and John Lowe have suggested (195–96), Hurston draws heavily on the myth of Isis and Osiris in her creation of Janie and Tea Cake to suggest their equal stature and power and to create a mythic analogue for her pear tree vision. The same age as Osiris, associated with trees and enjoyment as the Egyptian god was and called by his title, "Son of the Evening Sun" (264), Tea Cake represents an ideal of masculinity in pointed contrast to Starks's oppressive, white male god and is the fitting mythic consort for the powerful black woman that Janie becomes. In drawing on the Isis and Osiris myth, Hurston grounds this relationship, one characterized by reciprocity and self-affirmation rather than oppression and hierarchy, in African rather than in European culture. Significantly, Janie and Tea Cake's relationship flourishes not in Nanny's or Joe Starks's world but on the Muck, a setting Hurston depicts as a black Eden free of outside cultural influence and the deadly insipidity of the dominant white world. Stressing both the blackness of the soil and the rich plant life it supports in her first description of the Muck, Hurston images (as she had in the supernatural tales of *Mules and Men*) the flowering of black people possible outside white influence:

everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (193)

The interpersonal relationship that Tea Cake's racial and gender identity makes possible with Janie is here translated to a larger societal level. In the soil of this black milieu grow vigorous black people, plants contrasting sharply with the ones stunted and mutilated in a white world. With the status differences and white values that Starks sought to reinforce absent on the Muck, artificial hierarchical divisions evaporate: Janie is just another person rather than Mrs. Mayor, and the Saws, instead of being ostracized, are accepted as equals. The gender hierarchies of Nanny's metaphor are also foreign to this community. With no white man tossing his load to the black man, black men do not toss it on to black women; and in the absence of oppressive sex roles that restrict women to serving men, Janie and Tea Cake "partake with everything," sharing in both paid labor and domestic work (199). On their porch, everyone takes part in the rich cultural life of the community, including Janie, who is no longer merely an outside observer or a spit-cup for men's words, but an active participant who "could tell big stories herself" (200).

The exception to the vigorous racial and sexual identities in the community (in fact, the serpent in this Eden) is Mrs. Turner, a female version of Joe Starks, who also rejects her own blackness and the cultural vitality around her. Hurston stresses the spiritual insipidity and deformed identity that result from her worship of white gods in her description of her as "a milky sort of a woman that belonged to child-bed. Her shoulders rounded a little, and she must have been conscious of her pelvis because she kept it stuck out in front of her so she could always see it" (208). Like Starks whose body looks "like bags hanging from an ironing board" (125), Mrs. Turner's "was an ironing board with things throwed at it" (208). Just as Starks's definition of maleness finally makes him impotent, Mrs. Turner is sexually insipid and symbolically uncreative. Even though she has given birth to six children, only one has lived (211), and he is, as Mr. Turner tells Tea Cake, "de last stroke of exhausted nature" (214). Her husband, an ideal mate for her, is another emphatically diminished human being: "He was a vanish-looking kind of man as if there used to be parts about him that stuck out individually but now he hadn't a thing about him that wasn't dwindled and blurred. Just like he had been sandpapered down to a long oval mass" (214).

Largely a ludicrous and pathetic figure (merely a source of gossip "when things were dull on the Muck" [217]), Mrs. Turner poses no threat to the community as long as she is met with the kind of unruffled indifference Janie displays.13 Tea Cake's response is quite different, however. His statement that he "hates dat woman lak poison" (213), as later events will show, signals not a rejection of her cultural whiteness, but his own insecurity in the face of it. Jealousy of another man as vigorous as himself would have been understandable and benign (as Janie's of Nunkie is), but his fear that Janie will respond to Mrs. Turner's match-making attempts arises not from lover's passion but from his own submerged racial and sexual insecurity. The first evidence that Tea Cake has been infected with Mrs. Turner's poison and the effect this will have on his pear tree relationship with Janie arises when he beats Janie. It is not the violence of the act that Hurston pinpoints as problematic, but Tea Cake's motives for it, a fact emphasized in the contrasts between Tea Cake's beating of Janie and their earlier fight over Nunkie. When Janie feels jealous of Nunkie, she tackles both her and Tea Cake in the heat of passion, "Never th[inking] at all … just act[ing] on feelings" (204). That the honest expression of feelings among equals—even when acted out violently—poses no threat to the balance of their relationship is depicted in Hurston's description of their reconciliation. Their reunion, described in language that echoes the pear tree metaphor, reflects the reciprocity of their fight: "They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion" (205). Like the bee that "sink[s] into the sanctum of a bloom" and "the thousand sister calyxes [that] arch to meet the love embrace" (24), Tea Cake and Janie here reenact the pear tree scene, fighting and loving as equals.

Tea Cake's violence toward Janie—no spontaneous expression of feeling but a premeditated "brainstorm" (218) hatched after Mrs. Turner's brother returns to the Muck—has both a very different motivation and a very different effect.14 Fundamentally manipulative and coercive, the beating is calculated to assert his domination of Janie: Tea Cake whips her "Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but [because] it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around to show he was boss" (218). His target (as he admits) is not Janie, but Mrs. Turner: "'Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause *she* done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss'" (220), to "'let her see dat Ah got control'" (220).

Equating light skin with passive female victimization and blackness with defiance, the men on the Muck express admiration not only for Tea Cake's assertion of dominance but also for what they fantasize as Janie's acquiescence:

"Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit you back, neither. Take some uh dese of rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit em. Dat's de reason Ah done quit beatin' mah woman. You can't make no mark on 'em at all. Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake." (218–19)

Although it is hard to imagine the Janie who has fought on equal footing with Tea Cake over Nunkie just a few pages earlier as this simpering victim, Tea Cake's satisfied response, "'Dat's right'" (219), ominously suggests his rejection of Janie's equality and his acceptance of an identity she has fought to reject. Tea Cake's changed view of Janie is further emphasized in this interchange among the men. When Sop-de-Bottom bemoans his fate of being equally matched with his woman, Tea Cake's bragging rejoinder, bespeaking an ominous value on Janie's social status and wealth, could well have been spoken by Joe Starks: "'Mah Janie is uh high time woman and useter things. Ah didn't git her outa de middle uh de road. Ah got her outa uh big fine house. Right now she got money enough in de bank tuh buy up dese ziggaboos and give 'em away'" (219). His final remark violates their reciprocal agreement to "partake wid everything" and makes explicit the oppression developing in his attitude toward Janie: "'Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be'" (219). As these comments foreshadow, Tea Cake's behavior changes from this point on, echoing the falsely solicitous actions of Starks who oppresses Janie at the same time that he places her on a pedestal. To assert the power of his masculinity by assuring himself of Janie's passive femininity, he "would not let her go with him to the field. He wanted her to get her rest" (228).

With this set of values introduced and the "pear tree" paradise of the Muck spiritually destroyed, it is little surprise that Janie and Tea Cake are driven out by the hurricane that strikes in the next chapter. That this banishment is punishment for Tea Cake's "sin" is strongly hinted at in Tea Cake's reaction to signs of the approaching storm. When a friend, Lias, stops by and urges them to leave because "De crow gahn up" (230), Tea Cake ignores this natural warning, arguing in a way that indicates both acceptance of white superiority and an uncharacteristic concern for money: "'Dat ain't nothin'. You ain't seen de bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now. Man, de money's too good on the Muck'" (230).15 His acceptance of Mrs. Turner's social "pecking-order" is further revealed when Lias tries to persuade Tea Cake to evacuate by pointing to the Indians leaving. Tea Cake responds with a racist comment on the Indians he clearly sees as his inferiors: "'Dey don't always know, Indians don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else dey'd own dis country still. De white folks ain't gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it's dangerous'" (231). With the new set of values Tea Cake embraces, it is fitting that, when he finally does try to leave, he takes his insurance papers with him (237) and abandons his guitar (238).16

Hurston embellishes her racial theme in the storm episode of the novel. Beneath the surface of what seems simply dramatic action and vivid language, she carefully develops the storm as a symbolic ritual of purification, a rejection of those characters who have betrayed the sexually egalitarian and culturally autonomous values of black life on the Muck. Hurston suggests this idea in the contrasts between those who are saved and those who perish. Characters such as Lias, Stew Beef, and Motor Boat, whom Hurston paints as ethnically secure and immune to Mrs. Turner's influence, survive. The casualties are those who look to the white world for answers, placing their trust in its power and failing to appreciate the storm's:

The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your cracks, shiver in your wet beds and wait on the mercy of the Lord. The bossman might have the thing stopped by morning anyway. (234)

The function of the storm as the symbolic destroyer of white power is also revealed in the language Hurston uses to depict the storm's aftermath. The apparent chaos it brings is actually described as the breakdown of artificial hierarchies; for instance, the storm dissolves boundaries between the human and the natural as the lake's waters enter the houses and a terror-stricken baby rabbit seeks refuge in the house with Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat (235). Even the lines between water and land become blurred when stray fish are found "swimming in the yard" (236) and the "water full of things living and dead. Things that didn't belong in water" (244). Significantly, when these boundaries are erased, so are racial distinctions. Unable to distinguish white corpses from black, white officials are stymied in their ludicrous attempt to ensure that white corpses get coffins and black ones quick-lime (253).

The destruction wreaked by the storm is also described as an act of liberation. Destroying the dike, a futile human attempt to control Nature's power, the storm loosens the lake's "chains" (239) and turns it into "a road crusher on a cosmic scale" (239), rushing "after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers" (239). Tea Cake and Janie sense a new order in the bizarre scenes they encounter while trying to escape: "They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought conquest over the other" (243). Even the rattlesnakes do not bite during the storm (244) in this world momentarily purged of violence and oppression.17

In addition to depicting the storm as the cultural equivalent of the biblical flood, Hurston also buries in the novel an implicit definition of its identity. Its fury compared to the sound of African drums (233–34), it is subtly identified as a black power, striking at night and bringing darkness in its wake. A "God" (235, 236) at war with and finally more powerful than the false white god, it literally "put[s] out the light" (236), symbolically the white principles of hierarchy and oppression embraced by Starks and rekindled by Tea Cake. Hurston also implies a gendered identity for this power. Whereas the lake is repeatedly identified as "he" (234, 235, 239), the storm—"Havoc there with her mouth wide open" (246)—is, through Hurston's symbolic use of folk saying, labeled "she." Hurston repeats this gender identification and a reminder of the storm's power to destroy white men's creations; as Janie and Tea Cake survey the ravaged city of Palm Beach, they see "the hand of horror on everything. Houses without roofs, and roofs without houses. Steel and stone all crushed and crumbled like wood. The mother of malice had trifled with men (250–51). This black, female power cleanses the world through its flood, freeing even its male counterpart in Hurston's ironic and subversive revision of the biblical myth.

Given the changes that have occurred in Tea Cake's sense of racial and gender identity, it is not surprising that he, too, is killed as a result of events surrounding the storm. Numerous details woven into this episode suggest that his death is not merely a tragic ending to a love story but rather the symbolic expurgation of the false values he has come to represent. Hurston dramatizes these changes in Tea Cake in her description of his illness. Although he seems selfless and noble, sacrificing himself to save Janie, Hurston very subtly but carefully suggests his symbolic identity with the mad dog that bites him. Walking with a "queer loping gait, swinging his head from side to side and his jaws clenched in a funny way" (271), "snarl[ing]" and giving Janie a "look of ferocity" (269), he is no longer the bee-man Osiris but the oppressive male dog of black folk culture alluded to by Big Sweet in *Mules and Men* and critiqued in Hurston's short story, "Muttsy."18 As these details and the fact that Janie survives even though bitten by Tea Cake suggest, the illness that kills Tea Cake is a spiritual one—symbolically, he is the mad dog and not its noble victim.

Tea Cake now presents a mortal threat to Janie, as his increasing similarity to Starks suggests. For instance, Tea Cake's first thoughts about why he might feel sick echo Starks's criticism of Janie in the store: "He was not accusing Janie of malice and design. He was accusing her of carelessness. She ought to realize that water buckets needed washing like everything else. He'd tell her about it good and proper when she got back. What was she thinking about nohow? He found himself very angry about it" (259). Whereas Janie desperately tries to "partake wid everything," pleading with Tea Cake to let her share his pain (258), the reciprocity characterizing their early relationship is glaringly absent. Like Killicks and Starks, who both hid from Janie any signs of vulnerability, Tea Cake tries to hide his illness from Janie (264), hoping his symptoms "would stop before Janie noticed anything. He wanted to try to drink water again but he didn't want her to see him fail" (264). Although Tea Cake wants to let Janie comfort him as they have done for one another repeatedly, his obsession with making her realize "'it's uh man heah'" (248) makes him fearful of appearing weak and keeps him silent (266). As he moves to control her voice (271) and her movements (268, 270), his attempt to kill Janie merely images the mortal spiritual danger he poses to her. No passive victim of an uncontrollable physical disease, "even in his delirium he took good aim" (272), his three misfired shots signaling the gravity of his betrayal.19 The events leading up to his death, thus, demonstrate the partial truth in Nanny's comments on love. In a world of "mules and men," in which relationships between men and women are not reciprocal ones, love can be—and in Janie's relationship with Tea Cake nearly is—"de very prong … black women gits hung on" (41).

Although Hurston's critique is necessarily veiled, Janie's character at the end of the novel is, in some ways, even more elusive and has led to vast disagreement among critics concerning her. Whereas most have argued that she emerges from the Muck as an independent female, some have concluded at the other extreme that the novel is far from feminist, one that finally paints Janie as a devoted wife who adores a husband who beats and finally tries to kill her. Jennifer Jordan provides a strong critique of the novel that highlights some of its ambiguities. Tea Cake's death, she argues is "a typical resolution of the tale of courtly love in which the young troubadour or knight engages in an all-consuming passion with a lady of high rank. Tea Cake, the young bluesman and Janie's social inferior, falls in love with a lady, dedicates himself to making her happy, and sacrifices his life fighting a dragon, a kind of mad cow/dog/monster. Hurston creates an alliance of pure romance, a life of adventure and sexual union in a kind of Eden" (110).20 Key to such readings of Janie as no autonomous woman is the fact that we see no reaction from Janie to Tea Cake's beating (in contrast to her realization about Joe when he slaps her [112]) and hear no comments but loving ones expressed to him as his behavior becomes more threatening. Even after his death, Janie never verbalizes any defiance of Tea Cake or understanding of the changes in him that she had expressed after Joe's death. Focusing on these silences, some critics have concluded that Janie emerges from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* not as a liberated woman but as a dependent one blinded by love.

Whereas these critics point to an important issue in our evaluation of Janie, it is not adequate to see her as simply self-deluded or her silence as Hurston's own ideological blindness. She does actually kill Tea Cake when his threat to her is a mortal one—no insignificant symbolic act—as a number of readers since Alice Walker have pointed out. With a focus on this action and the less explosive narrative possibilities open to Hurston for ending the book, Hurston's novel could just as easily be read as an inversion of the canonical story Jordan finds. To have "the lady" save herself at the novel's end stretches the seams of the genre; to have "the monster" she slays be her lover and the traditional story's hero rips them apart.

The frames at the beginning and end of the novel further suggest neither a broken nor a deluded woman. Physically powerful, "her firm buttocks like … grape fruits in her hip pocket; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; [and] her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt" (11), she strides into Eatonville, Hurston suggests, a strong and vigorous woman committed to life and experience despite the death of her lover. She looks over her past, not with wistful nostalgia but with a sober, philosophical eye, seeing "her life like a great tree in leaf with things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" with "dawn and doom … in the branches" (20). No stump or mere leaf, hers is not the mutilated identity of other characters in the novel who have sold themselves to dreams that destroyed them. Rather, the beginning and ending frame for the novel suggest, she has become the kind of active female imaged in her pear tree vision, one who has experienced much in her relationship with a "bee-man" but who is not defined by that relationship. In fact, when she first talks with Pheoby, she speaks not of romance and adoration of Tea Cake but of experiences much wider than love or even Tea Cake as an individual: "'Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life,'" she tells her; "'Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me'" (18). In contrast to some readers' focus on romance and Janie's relationship with Tea Cake, living—not just loving—is what Janie stresses in reviewing her own experience. Such a focus is also the omniscient narrator's. When in the book's final images, Janie pulls in her horizon "like a great fish-net," it is "life" (286)—including, but certainly not limited to love—that she finds in its meshes. When Janie does speak to Pheoby about love, it is not to depict her relationship with Tea Cake as perfect or necessarily even the sole love of her life but to describe love as many-faceted and ever-changing. Love, for a woman who is supremely confident and self-affirming, "'ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore'" (284). As Janie here suggests, she emerges from the novel as no conventional romantic heroine searching to duplicate her relationship with Tea Cake or turning away from life because of the futility of doing so but as an autonomous black woman who faces the future in a spirit of engagement and openness to the flux of experience, "the dawn and doom" she has learned make up love and life.

The frames at the beginning and end of the novel presenting Janie back in Eatonville are thus critical in any evaluation of her character, for they show a woman who has gained the self-affirmation and self-expression she had sought before ever meeting Tea Cake. Having found years earlier "a jewel down inside herself" that she yearned to "gleam … around" (138) and having first done so in her relationship with him, the Janie of these frames is not a woman who "glow[s]" (146), "beam[s]" (153), and "lights up" only in the presence of her lover. At the novel's end, she walks with her own lamp, its light "like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire" (285), fully able, even with her lover now dead, "to show her shine" (139).

Janie's wisdom and strength—even her regal, almost haughty indifference toward the gossip of the porch-talkers—indicate a woman, like Isis, not destroyed by the tragedy of her life but able to transform it. Just as Isis collected the parts of Osiris's body after his death and reanimated him, Janie remembers Tea Cake, not as the mad dog or even the "man" who needed assurance that he was one, but as a "bee-man," an Osirian figure her spiritual equal and appropriate counterpart. Burying him with his guitar and imagining him "prancing" through her room, she embraces the ideal of full reciprocity that characterized the best of their relationship. She brings home the symbol of that equality imaged in the pear blossom and bee—some seeds from the Muck, evidence not only of the creativity resulting from such healthy relationships between black women and men but also of her own unfinished life and future growth. The reconstituted masculinity and femininity that Hurston imagines are beautifully depicted in our final images of Tea Cake and Janie. Using the kind of androgynous images she had used earlier in the novel to suggest Janie and Tea Cake's healthy versions of male and female identity—Janie shooting a gun and Tea Cake combing her hair, for instance—Hurston closes the novel by cloaking Tea Cake with a feminine image, "with the sun for a shawl" (286), and Janie with a masculine one, her horizon draped over her shoulder "like a great fish-net" (286). As Janie's final thoughts, they show her embracing a conception of male and female identity that, transcending polarities of active/passive, strong/weak, replaces the gender hierarchies of Jim and Arvey Meserve's world.

As the fish-net image suggests, Janie's memory of Tea Cake is avowedly selective, not the self-deluded inability to distinguish among Tea Cake's different selves, as some critics have argued, but an active remembering. In collecting the "bee-man" parts of Tea Cake, she displays Isis's power to refashion a vibrant black man, one not dwarfed, mutilated, or dehumanized (as so many characters in the novel are) by submission to the dominant white world or its values. Just as Isis's act is responsible for the rebirth of spring, Janie's is not merely that of an adoring lover who saves and serves her love but one with much broader social significance. In imagining the possibility of black manhood different from Joe Starks or the "mad dog," Janie plants the seeds of a world purged of oppressive hierarchies, a world neither sexually nor racially one of mules and men.

Although the beginning and ending frames for the novel are an unequivocal tribute to Janie's stature and power—in a profound sense, the townspeople whose eyes are glued on Janie as she walks through her gate are also "watching God"—the narrative of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is more ambiguous in its treatment of her experience and awareness. Whereas most critics who disagree about Janie tend to be selective, focusing either on Janie's silence and Tea Cake's beating or on the image of Janie at the beginning of the book, the complex relationship between both must be addressed. To smooth out the narrative wrinkles in the novel is both to simplify the tale of race and sex Hurston tells and to miss an important element of the strategy she fashioned to tell such a story.

That Janie's story should be subject to so many divergent interpretations among critics should not be surprising, for (as Hurston is careful to illustrate) the same is true for reactions to her story within the novel itself. The porch-talkers of Eatonville, for instance, who as Pheoby points out, "'done "heard" 'bout [Janie] just what they hope done happened'" (16), see in Janie's solitary return evidence of an older woman used and spurned by a young rake while the black men at her trial tell a story of a loving Tea Cake betrayed by her. The white jury and audience at Janie's trial have yet another interpretation of Janie's experience, one that Hurston carefully but quite subtly suggests is equally suspect.21

Even though they find her innocent of murder, Hurston emphasizes their lack of real knowledge about Janie or Tea Cake (274–75) and the limited version of Janie and Tea Cake's experience that they hear. We do not know exactly what Janie tells them (details Hurston quite strategically omits), but Dr. Simmons, who sets the stage and the tone for white reaction to Janie, focuses understandably on what he knows—Tea Cake's illness and death: Dr Simmons "told about Tea Cake's sickness and how dangerous it was to Janie and the whole town, and how he was scared for her and thought to have Tea Cake locked up in the jail, but seeing Janie's care he neglected to do it. And how he found Janie all bit in the arm, sitting on the floor and petting Tea Cake's head when he got there. And the pistol right by his hand on the floor" (276–77). This scene, as powerful for the judge and jury as it is for Dr. Simmons, is nevertheless limited and partial as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (278) about Janie and Tea Cake, for it erases both the vigorous equality of their relationship and the threats to it the changes in Tea Cake constitute.

The terms in which the judge presents the case to the jury, indebted to Simmons's testimony, similarly obscure the complexities of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. He tells them to decide "'whether the defendant has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstance who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy'" (279). With the first speakers setting the tone, it is no surprise that the jury sees in Janie's story not "a wanton killer" (279) but an adoring wife who took her loving husband out of his misery. It is an interpretation that wins her her freedom and the goodwill of the white women in the room who "cried and stood around her like a protecting wall" (280), but in its view of "Janie Woods the relic of Tea Cake's Janie" (275), it falsifies Janie's experience, diminishes her stature, and transforms the self-preservation in her shooting of Tea Cake into selfless female devotion. Like the porch-talkers, the members of the white audience at the trial have heard the tale "they hoped to hear"—in this case, a story of traditional romance with characters more nearly resembling Arvey and Jim Meserve than Janie and Tea Cake.

Constantly expressing worry about being misunderstood, Janie too seems to recognize the ambiguity of her own story. As she informs Pheoby, she wants not only to tell her her story but also to help her see its significance—"'ain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understanding to go 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different from a coon hide'" (19). Janie's comment indicates not only her view of Pheoby as ideal listener for her tale but also the vast difference of interpretation to which it can be subject. Without having "see[n] the fur," the white people, the porch-talkers, and the black men at the end of the novel hear what they want to hear in Janie's experience, reaching interpretations that say more about their racial and sexual identities than about Janie's.

In each of these cases, Hurston is careful to suggest that race and gender play a central role in the interpretation of Janie's story. The townspeople, the narrator explicitly announces, are not simply mean spirited gossipers but black people who "had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (9–10). Their animosity toward a black woman grows out of a context of racial oppression as does that of Sop and his friends during Janie's trial, "there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks" (275). Echoing the reaction of Jim Allen, Joe Starks, Mrs. Turner, and others, these "mules" have made themselves feel human by dominating and dehumanizing other victims. In the hierarchical world of race and gender described by Nanny, the black woman is "the mule of the world," the bottom where not only work but also frustrated anger and misdirected aggression ultimately land.

Although the white people's reaction is very different, Hurston emphasizes that their apparent empathy and concern for Janie is as grounded in the politics of race and gender as the black men's antipathy. Hearing a different story from the one Janie tells Pheoby (before speaking, she recognizes that she "was not at home" [278]), the white audience at the trial, Hurston suggests, supports Janie for reasons having as much to do with the context in which Janie tells her story as with whatever details she provided. Undoubtedly influenced by the support of the two powerful white men, the doctor and the sheriff, the white audience is insulated from the threat the killing of a black man by a black woman poses. As the rhetorical question in the narrative—"What need had *they* to leave their richness to come look on Janie in her overalls" (274–75)—suggests, they are untouched by the intragroup struggles between black women and men that have led to Janie's trial or that are evident at it. Rather, like Joe Starks, who owned an entire town and could thus afford to pamper a yellow mule, they too have and in acquitting Janie exercise "the power to free things." Janie's action in no way a threat to their position at the top of Nanny's hierarchy, their support for her costs and risks nothing; in fact, support for a black woman in a conflict with black men buttresses their position. Because the challenge to their dominance comes from the black men at the trial, the judge is quick to protect Janie against their wrath, silencing Sop and his friends with a pointed reminder of their subordination: "'We are handling this case. Another word out of you, out of any of you niggers back there, and I'll bind you over to the big court'" (277). Eager to demonstrate their racial dominance, the white judge silences them and invites Janie to speak. His reaction, the white women's applause, and the jury's acquittal thus demonstrate not their understanding but rather their misinterpretation and appropriation of a black woman's story for their own purposes.

As Hurston suggests in detailing and evaluating the reactions of the white people and the black men (none of these people "understand" [279, 281]), a black woman's story narrated in Nanny's hierarchical world of race and gender is subject to vast differences in interpretation. The pressures of a white context, which exacerbate internal divisions, result not only in the black men's rejection of Janie but also in their more serious misreading of the power relations inherent in her story. Focusing on the white jury's exoneration of Janie, the black men astutely recognize that race has played a role in her trial (it would certainly have been a different affair, as they argue, had she shot a white man), but in missing the gendered component of the racial conflict there (the fact that the judge privileges Janie's story and silences theirs to exercise power over them), Sop and his friends erroneously conclude that "'uh white man and uh black woman is the freest thing on earth. Dey do as dey please'" (280).

Hurston earmarks Pheoby's response to Janie's story as the privileged interpretation among the wide variety it is given. Having received "the understanding" from Janie, she responds in a manner quite different from any other character in the novel. Her brief response, "'Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this'" (284), suggests that she has heard a story not of female perfidy, conventional romance, or wifely devotion but of female growth and possibility. Unlike the white women at the trial, she responds not with tears but with demands on the man in her life, evidence that she has been moved by a story of the struggles for female equality rather than one extolling the perfections of Janie's husband.

In addition to demonstrating the interaction of race and gender critical in interpretations of Janie's story, Hurston's detailed account of reactions at her trial also underscore the problems of *telling* such a story of intragroup conflict to a heterogenous audience. Like Janie at the trial, Hurston is enmeshed in a web of racial and sexual factors that make simply telling "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" about Janie and Tea Cake the goal only of a naif. A direct presentation of conflicts between women and men would subject her to the same hostility aimed at women in the novel like Janie and Mrs. Robbins whose actions are seen to be challenges to black men and to the kind of racial exploitation evident in the white people's reactions. In telling the story of Janie and Tea Cake, Hurston threads her way through this minefield, camouflaging her story both through the careful weaving of symbols already discussed and through careful narration.

Whereas many critics have commented on Hurston's narrative technique in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, often ultimately evaluating it quite differently, most have focused on the relationship between narrative voice and Janie's character. Several critics, assuming that the novel is the record of what Janie tells to Pheoby, argue that Janie's finding of a voice at the novel's end meshes with her achievement of autonomous selfhood. Emphasizing the fact that the novel is not narrated in first person, others have argued that Janie's failure to tell her own story is evidence that she finds neither her voice nor her independence in the novel.22 Still other critics, including Gates, Awkward, and Callahan have discussed the multivocal quality of the narrative as, itself, an affirmation of Janie's stature.23

Shifting the focus from what the novel's narrative technique tells us about Janie's character to what it says about Hurston's own position in telling her story, I want to suggest that Janie does find her voice—the woman whose words kill Joe Starks and inspire Pheoby, who speaks so directly in the opening and closing frames certainly has—but that Hurston very self-consciously does not allow the reader to hear the story in Janie's own words. This aspect of the novel is not a failing—either Janie's or Hurston's—but a strategic maneuver by Hurston in telling a very incendiary tale, a strategy she uses to protect Janie and her complex tale of race and gender from the kind of exploitation and appropriation evident at her trial.

Hurston actually goes to some lengths to emphasize that the narrative is much more complicated than a simple record of what Janie told her "bosom friend" as they sat on her back porch in the darkness. In addition to the movements between first and third persons, which signal voices other than Janie's, Janie expressly refuses to tell her own story. Her comment to Pheoby, "'You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf'" (17), confirms that we hear Janie's story in someone else's words, someone like Pheoby, on whom Janie can depend "'for a good thought'" (19). The character of Pheoby is thus central to discerning both the "understanding" Hurston attaches to Janie's story as well as the narrative technique she devises to convey it; for through the delineation of Pheoby's character, Hurston cleverly hints at the motives of the novel's narrator and the ways that the narrator selects details to shape the intimate version of her story for a more public heterogenous audience.

A devoted friend to Janie, Pheoby at every appearance both supports and defends her friend from the "killing tools" of the community, trying at the very beginning of the novel, for instance, to fend off malicious gossip about her and vowing at the end that "'Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin''" (284). As supportive of Janie as Big Sweet and Hurston's mother were of her, Pheoby is, indeed, someone Janie can count on "for a good thought," both in real life and in her public rendering of Janie's story. Like other of Hurston's strong black women, Pheoby is also depicted as a very savvy person who knows her community and how to negotiate power within it. When she goes to warn Janie about the community gossip, she does not go by the direct route that would draw attention to her mission and elicit inquiries about Janie's business; instead, she "picked her way over to Janie's house like a hen to a neighbor's garden. Stopped and talked a little with everyone she met, turned aside momentarily to pause at a porch or two—going straight by walking crooked. So her firm intention looked like an accident and she didn't have to give her opinion to folks along the way" (168–69). Adopting the familiar posture of Hurston's other trickster figures, Pheoby's behavior exhibits the indirection and conscious use of ambiguity that characterize the novel's narration. She also demonstrates her astute awareness of audience in the counsel she gives Janie, repeatedly advising her to be silent, not to speak about her feelings to an unsympathetic audience who could not possibly understand (127, 143, 173). Practicing what she preaches, she is careful (as Janie knows [173]) about what she reveals about Janie to others and proud to acknowledge this sign of their intimacy. As she assures Janie, "'Ah jus lak uh chicken. Chicken drink water, but he don't pee-pee'" (173).

The picture that emerges of the narrator Janie chooses to have relate her story is, thus, a surprisingly full one of someone who has heard the story in Janie's own words and whose response suggests that she represents Janie's ideal listener. Supportive of Janie and astute enough to see problems in uncritically telling her story, such a narrator can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick, narrating Janie's story to be true to its volatile themes but sensitive to the context in which they will be relayed. The novel itself is told by such a circumspect narrator. The story given to the reader is in "a friend's mouth," a "kissing friend" who tells a veiled version of her story, who keeps the full "understanding" implicit in the images and symbols to protect Janie from yet more killing tools and loaded guns.

One strategy Hurston employs is Pheoby's use of silence, keeping Janie silent at the most revealing and incendiary moments in her struggle with Tea Cake. Like Pheoby, who knows when Janie's words would be misunderstood or used against her, Hurston also frequently omits Janie's reactions to and assessments of Tea Cake's abusive behavior not necessarily because she had none but because to present them would subject her story to the same dynamics of audience seen in John's and Janie's trials. For instance, whereas many critics have assumed that Janie passively accepted Tea Cake's beating of her, the narrative itself provides no such certainty. Having shown Janie's willingness to confront Tea Cake both verbally and physically in the fight over Nunkie, such a reaction seems unlikely; but for Hurston to present it directly in the narrative would be quite problematic. Hurston's narrative solution is not only to omit whatever words and actions constitute Janie's response but also to keep her off-stage for the description of it.24 We learn about this fight after the fact through the biased version Tea Cake braggingly conveys to an envious Sop. Significantly, we also never hear in direct address what Janie thought about Tea Cake's illness and death. The rhetorical power of Hurston's narrative strategy, her decision to put Janie's story not in first person but in her friend's mouth, is clear when one imagines what the Janie of the opening and closing frames, a woman who minces no words and who is utterly indifferent to public reaction, might say. For a black woman to say she had to kill a black man because, as Lucy had advised Isis, she loved herself more, because he had become a mortal threat to her, or because he had begun to act like a white man are words that would alienate some segments of her audience and be used by others. To circumvent those problems, Hurston uses her own "fish-net" in narrating the conflict between Janie and Tea Cake, intentionally telling a story with "holes" in it, strategic gaps and silences—how Janie responded to Tea Cake's beating, what exactly she says in court, what she did and thought on the Muck during the weeks after Tea Cake's death—that mask the conflict in their relationship.

The narrative handling of Tea Cake is equally masterful. Again, what would have been lost in a first-person narration by Janie is critical. She would not be able to provide, for instance, either Tea Cake's radically changed thoughts about Janie or his conversation (208) with Sop and his friends, both of which are important and unbiased signals of the changes that have taken place within him. The narrative approach Hurston takes allows her to convey "the understanding" of what has happened to him; but to avoid having this critique become a weapon in the hands of her own jurors, Hurston is careful to veil his violence toward Janie, to treat his "mad dog" qualities, which could so easily evoke the vengeance directed at Mrs. Robbins and feed the kind of stereotypes John Pearson fears, symbolically. As careful in picking her words to describe Tea Cake's illness as Pheoby is in picking her way to Janie's door, Hurston exploits ambiguity in her description of him, using careful phrasings that seem to exonerate Tea Cake by making him a noble victim at the same time that they pinpoint the reality of what is destroying him.

Perhaps the best example of this strategy is found in Hurston's sole reference to Janie's assessment of Tea Cake's illness and death. In narrating Janie's testimony at her trial before the divided audience that mirrors Hurston's own, the narrator conveys only a summary (and even then in indirect address) that is fraught with ambiguity: "She tried to make them see how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn't get rid of the dog and live. He had to die to get rid of the dog. But she hadn't wanted to kill him. A man is up against a hard game when he must die to beat it. She made them see how she couldn't ever want to be rid of him" (278). An excellent example of how Hurston works to convey "the understanding" but mask the intragroup conflict, this passage is accurate in its implied reference to the death of Tea Cake the "bee-man" and Janie's love for "him," the malignity of the "mad dog" and the reason Janie had to kill "it," but it is also ambiguous enough to mesh with the scenario described by Dr. Simmons and the sheriff. By exploiting gaps, ambiguities, and silences in this way, Hurston intentionally tells a tale that can be read as "mink skin" or "coon hide," a story of a black woman's resistance to male oppression that sometimes looks surprisingly similar to the jury's version of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake. To protect the story of a black woman killing her husband from misuse by black men or white people, Hurston uses elements of traditional romance ultimately to subvert the genre. Buried beneath the romantic surface is the story of a woman tempted to succumb to the passive female role assigned her in the prototypical white woman's story but who does not, a woman who does finally love herself more, who neither dies at her lover's hands nor withers away after his death.

Hurston's need to camouflage female resistance is perhaps strongest in the scene in which Janie actually shoots Tea Cake. Just as she had used elements of the supernatural to mask female resistance of "Black Death" and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston camouflages female aggression against sexual oppression in this scene through the use of romantic elements, carefully describing Janie's shooting of Tea Cake both to imply the import of her act and to veil its volatile implications. To do so, she depicts the internal struggle in Janie's mind between one woman tempted to protect her lover whatever the cost and another who protects herself from aggressive threat even in the person of her beloved. The entire passage battles between two different selves and two different narrative voices. When Janie first notices the gun under Tea Cake's pillow she responds with surprisingly rational thought, sizing up the situation, weighing alternatives, and taking action. Rushing to see if it is loaded, she checks the ammunition, starts to load the gun, but thinks with foresight, "he might break it and find out she knew. That might urge his disordered mind to action" (270). Neither immobilized by devotion nor content to be sacrificed, she whirls the cylinder to make sure his first three shots will be blanks. Her actions methodical, knowledgeable, and deliberate, she then finds the rifle and strategically moves it to the kitchen "almost behind the stove where it was hard to see" (270). Similarly, immediately before shooting Tea Cake, Janie is in control of her actions, moving "deftly" (272) as she raises her gun, assessing Tea Cake's aim with enough calm to recognize its accuracy. No actions of an acquiescent woman like Arvey, who is paralyzed by her husband's violence, they are, in fact, those of a traditional male hero who skillfully and calmly slays the monster.

Attempting to protect her story from white appropriation and "the killing tools" of black men, Hurston is careful to temper this portion of the narrative with elements of traditional romance. As the narrative reveals Janie unhesitatingly moving to save herself, a different voice (articulating the battle within Janie) utters reassuring words in sharp contrast to her actions: "Tea Cake wouldn't hurt *her*. He was jealous and wanted to scare her. She'd just be in the kitchen as usual and never let on. They would laugh over it when he got well" (270). This passage and others in this section—"Of course she was too fussy, but it did no harm to play safe. She ought not to let sick Tea Cake do something that would drive him crazy when he found out what he had done" (270–71)—both convey the inner conflict in Janie and camouflage the self-possession and undeniable violence of her action. With the real dramatic tension in this scene arising from uncertainty not about what Tea Cake will do so much as about what Janie will, Hurston's narrative vacillation mirrors Janie's struggle: will she play this scene as the love-struck and passive "tender woman" described by Sop or as one of his "ol rusty black women" (218–19) who defends herself.

Although the narrative excuses Janie's actions and the momentous answer to this question that her behavior finally bespeaks as the mere instinct (272) of a scared human being fighting for her life, Hurston shows Janie exhibiting the power imaged in the storm, in Big Sweet, and in her own earlier defiance of Joe when she shoots Tea Cake, acting (as other strong black women in her fiction sometimes must) to purge from her life the racial, spiritual, and sexual threat that Tea Cake has come to represent.25 At that moment, the woman whom nearly everyone in her life—Nanny, Joe, Sop, and finally even Tea Cake—has tried to make live as a white woman, rejects that role. Only because she resists her greatest temptation to play it and breaks out of the narrow margins of traditional romance is she able to emerge as the autonomous black woman we see in the opening and closing frames of the novel.

This moment, a critical one for Janie in her quest, is also the most volatile one for Hurston in her narration. Hurston thus rounds out the scene with a picture of Janie coddling a dead Tea Cake in her arms:

It was the meanest moment of eternity. 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. (273–74)

Whereas Hurston here uses the tableau that so affects the white jurors and underpins their interpretation of Janie's experience, it is important to recall how tangential it is to Pheoby's. As the fact that she does not respond to Janie's story with vows to take her "sacrificing self" home to give Sam some "loving service" suggests (in fact, "sacrifice" and "service" are hardly the words any of Hurston's readers would use to epitomize Janie and Tea Cake's relationship), Hurston works here to allow a story of female resistance to "pass" as romance, to create an ending that would make possible Janie's "acquittal" with Hurston's own divided audience. That this was Hurston's struggle in the passage is supported by a look at earlier versions of it. Defining "loving service" in the manuscript as "cooking and washing his clothes and such intimacies as patching overalls" (103, JWJ), Hurston deletes that phrase (almost as if she realized it strained credulity, however well it masked the import of Janie's actions) and substitutes the second and third sentences to create a more plausible but still traditional romantic ending for an explosive, conflict-ridden narrative sequence.

The narrator of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* thus tells a Janus-faced story, a tale not only of a woman torn between two identities but one that exploits the resulting ambiguities in relating it to a heterogenous audience. As in the John tales, which succeed because the divided audience finally hears two very different stories in them, Hurston uses elements of romance in narrating Janie's temptation to succumb to it ultimately to mask her treatment of contentious "family matters." Just as white people could hear John tales but miss the import, hear "some scraps" but "not understand because they had nothing to hear things like that with. They were not looking for any hope in those days" ("High John," 70), Hurston counts on and even exploits misunderstanding by some segments of her audience. But the story of a black woman's struggle to define herself as neither mule nor white woman is also there for the Pheobys in Hurston's audience who are looking for hope and models of female resistance. Drawing on traditions of black expressivity in this way, Hurston—even though writing in Nanny's world and, like her, unable to "preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high" (32)—is able to "save the text" (32), to tell for those listeners a story not of traditional romance but of quest, not of selfless female devotion but of survival and self-affirming autonomy.

Meisenhelder, Susan Edwards. *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston*, 62–91, 209–213. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999. Quoted as "Mink Skin or Coon Hide: The Janus-Faced Narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2008. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=MCITEWWG008&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### "The porch couldn't talk for looking": Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 2001  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** Deborah Clarke  
**From:** *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views.

"So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different from a coon hide." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 7)

When Janie explains to her friend Pheoby the reason that simply telling her story will not suffice, why she needs to provide the "'understandin' to go 'long wid it,''' she employs a metaphor of vision: Unless you *see* the fur, you can't tell a mink from a coon. Stripped of their defining visual characteristics, the hides collapse into sameness. Recognizing visual difference, Hurston suggests, is crucial to understanding how identity is constructed: by skin and color. With this claim, she invokes new avenues into an African American tradition that has privileged voice as its empowering trope. From Phillis Wheatley's demonstration that an African can have a poetic voice, to Frederick Douglass's realization that freedom is measured by words and the ability to address a white audience, to Charles Chesnutt's presentation of the triumph of black storytelling in *The Conjure Woman*, voice has prevailed as the primary medium through which African American writers have asserted identity and humanity. Voice announced that visual difference was only skin deep, that black bodies housed souls that were, in essence, no different from those residing in white bodies. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is very much a part of this tradition, and has inspired many fine studies on the ways that its protagonist finds a voice and a self.1 Yet, as others have pointed out, Janie's voice is by no means unequivocally established by the end of the book. Robert Stepto was among the first to express dissatisfaction with the narrative structure and its third-person narrator; for him, the use of the narrator implies that "Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (166). More recently, Michael Awkward has pointed out that Janie is not interested in telling the community her story upon her return (6), and Mary Helen Washington argues that Janie is silenced at crucial spots in the narrative. Carla Kaplan, reviewing the discussions of voice that the novel has inspired, examines the ways that voice is both celebrated and undermined, noting that "Hurston privileges dialogue and storytelling at the same time as she represents and applauds Janie's *refusal* to speak" (121). Clearly, Janie's achievement of a voice is critical to her journey to self-awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough. As Maria Tai Wolff notes, "For telling to be successful, it must become a presentation of sights with words. The best talkers are 'big picture talkers'" (226). For Hurston, then, the construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see, a voice that celebrates the visible presence of black bodies.

I would suggest that, with its privileging of "mind pictures" over words, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* goes beyond a narrative authority based solely on voice, for, as Janie tells Pheoby, "'Talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else'" (183). In contrast to Joe Starks, who seeks to be a "big voice" only to have his wish become humiliatingly true when Janie informs him that he "'big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice'" (75), Janie seeks for a voice which can picture, which can make you see. The ability to use voice visually provides a literary space for African American women to relate their experiences in a world where, as Nanny says, "'We don't know nothin' but what we see'" (14). Thus, to expand "what we see" increases what we know. Throughout the novel, Hurston's use of visual imagery challenges dominant theories about the power hierarchies embedded in sight, long associated with white control, with Plato's rationality and logic, and, from a Freudian perspective, with male sexual dominance. She recasts the visual to affirm the beauty and power of color and to provide a vehicle for female agency.

In so doing, Hurston opens up different ways of conceptualizing the African American experience. Responding to the long history of blacks as spectacle—from slavery to minstrelsy to colonized object—she offers the possibility of reclaiming the visual as a means of black expression and black power. Controlling vision means controlling what we see, how we define the world. Visual power, then, brings political power, since those who determine what is seen determine what exists.2

In recent times, the Rodney King beating trial highlighted the significance of this power, when white interpretation sought to reverse the apparent vision presented by the video of the assault. Commenting on the trial, Judith Butler writes that the "visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (17). Zora Neale Hurston recognized this, anticipating what Houston Baker terms the "'scening' of the African presence" as a means of silencing that presence (42). As opposed to the King jurors, who learned not to see what was presented, Hurston's Janie makes readers "see" her story, and thus takes control of both the visual field and its interpretation. Visual control is not, obviously, the answer to racist oppression: Had the jurors "seen" what happened to Rodney King, it would not have undone his beating, and Hurston fully realized that black bodies bear the material evidence of racial violence (indeed, Janie's perceived beauty—her long hair and light skin—results from an interracial rape). But by taking visual control, Hurston looks back, challenges white dominance, and documents its material abuse of African Americans.

She thus manages to present a material self that can withstand the power of the gaze, transforming it into a source of strength. In establishing a rhetoric of sight, Hurston ensures that black bodies remain powerfully visible throughout the novel, particularly the bodies of black women.3 As Audre Lorde has noted, visibility is the cornerstone of black female identity, "without which we cannot truly live":

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness…. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (Lorde 42)

In attempting to reclaim visibility, Hurston focuses not just on rendering black bodies visible, but also on redeeming the "distortion of vision" of which Lorde speaks. Neither is an easy task, for Janie's visible beauty makes her vulnerable to both adoration and abuse, and the ability to see does not come readily. As the title of the novel indicates, Hurston is interested in far more than the development of one woman's journey to self-knowledge; she seeks to find a discourse that celebrates both the voices and the bodies of African Americans. By emphasizing "watching God," she foregrounds sight.

The existing theoretical work on vision is both useful and limiting for one seeking to understand Hurston's use of visual language. While various feminist theorists such as Braidotti, Haraway, and Keller have contributed greatly to our understanding of the topic, joining film theorists Mulvey, Doane, and Silverman, their work does not always take race sufficiently into account, though Jane Gaines reminds us of the racial privilege inherent in the gaze: "Some groups," she remarks, "have historically had the license to 'look' openly while other groups have 'looked' illicitly" (25). Some African American theorists such as Fanon, Wallace, and hooks do engage issues of visibility, but it is surprisingly under-examined in African American literary and film theory despite the fact that the visual is critical to black female identity, the source, Lorde insists, of black women's vulnerability and strength. Michelle Wallace has noted that "black women are more often visualized in mainstream American culture … than they are allowed to speak their own words or speak about their condition as women of color" (*Invisibility* 3). Hurston takes this visualization and turns it into a source of strength and a kind of language, thus redeeming visibility and establishing voice. While vision has long been associated with objectivity, this objective position has been assumed to be raceless (white) and sexless (male). Hurston exposes these dynamics, and in so doing lays the groundwork for a kind of vision that embodies blackness as both body and voice. The visible presence of Janie's material body reflects the complex historical and cultural forces which have created her and offers her a unique, individual identity. The visual, then, allows for a negotiation between the post-structuralist argument that identity is largely a construction and the concerns, particularly by nonwhites, that such a position erases individual identity and presence just as non-white peoples are beginning to lay claim to them. Awareness of the visible brings together the "politics of positioning," of who can look, with a recognition of the political and psychological significance of the gaze and with the "real" presence of a material body and individual self (Braidotti 73).

Hurston's insistence on the importance of visual expression, of course, stems largely from racism's disregard for African American individuality. In "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston explains the American attitude toward blacks as "THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY. This is an intangible built on folk belief. It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes. Everybody knows all about them. They are lay figures mounted in the museum where all may take them in at a glance" (170).4 By characterizing the white American perspective as that of museum-goers, Hurston suggests that the non-white population becomes mere spectacle, "lay figures" to be taken in "at a glance" by white eyes. We generally see this power dynamic in operation when black bodies are displayed. In minstrel shows, as Eric Lott points out, "'Black' figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures" (140–141).

The dynamic still exists. Steven Speilberg's 1997 film *Amistad*, for example, opens with an extended display of naked black bodies and offers its black cast few words, inviting the public to view blackness rather than listen to it.5 One is defined by how one is seen. For African Americans, this leads to a condition of "hypervisibility," in which "the very publicness of black people as a social fact works to undermine the possibility of actually seeing black specificity" (Lubiano 187). We need only look to Frantz Fanon for confirmation: "… already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed.* … I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!" (116). The racist power of visibility thus seems daunting, but Hurston not only takes on the challenge of reclaiming the visual as racially affirmative, she does so in response to a masculinist tradition in which visual power so often objectifies women. Her fiction reveals that, even in the context of a black community, the ability to see "black specificity" may be impaired, particularly when the specific individual is a woman. Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, who pioneered the participant-observer model of anthropological study, recognized the need for looking closely and carefully.6

*Their Eyes* opens with almost an anthropological tone, presenting us with a group of people who have been "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long" (1). After spending their days erased by white eyes as a specific presence, they become talkers and lookers. In order to regain human identity after "mules and other brutes had occupied their skins," they need to speak, listen, and see. It is important to note that Hurston equates all three sensory apparati; she does not privilege the verbal over the visual. Just as Pheoby's "hungry listening" helps Janie tell her story, so Janie's keen vision provides her with a story to tell. This vision is far different from one which "glances" at objects in a museum; such a way of seeing merely replicates white erasure of everything but skin color. Hurston seeks a uniquely African American vision, a way of seeing that both recognizes color and sees beyond it. But being black does not automatically confer, for Hurston, visual ability. In fact, visual language is predominately associated with women in her work. As Michelle Wallace has observed, "Gender is as important as 'race' to understanding how 'invisibility' has worked historically in all fields of visual production" ("Race" 258). Initially, the "big picture talkers" are male in this novel, and much of the talk centers on impressing and evaluating women. Janie's first appearance in Eatonville causes Hicks to proclaim his plans to get a woman just like her "'Wid mah talk'"(34). Hurston's challenge is to redeploy the language of the visual in ways that do not simply re-evoke the objectification of women of any color by situating them as objects of the male gaze.

In a culture that has so long defined black people as spectacle and black women as sexualized bodies, one needs to transform and redeem the potential of vision. While the visual certainly holds the threat of objectification, it can also serve as action—both personal and political. bell hooks argues that, for blacks, looking can be viewed as an act of resistance. She asserts that "all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze … produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze." With this gaze African Americans declared, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (116). Looking becomes an act charged with political resistance, a way to reconfigure the world and its power dynamics.7One must look, then, at African American writing as a means of challenging the power of the white gaze. We need to employ what Mae Henderson terms a new "angle of vision" (161), a means of looking back, of seeing without objectifying. To analyze Hurston's "angle of vision," I would argue, necessitates bringing together a wide range of theoretical perspectives, for seeing and being seen are highly complex acts in her fiction, acts which place individuals within an intricate web of personal and historical forces.

In Hurston's work, looking is more than a confrontational challenge. Her fiction is replete with examples of women's need to look, see, understand, and use language visually. In "Drenched in Light," an autobiographical story which recalls Hurston's descriptions of her childhood days, Isis, "a visual minded child," "pictur[es] herself gazing over the edge of the world into the abyss" (942). She escapes punishment for her many mischievous actions by impressing a white lady as being "drenched in light" (946); her strong visual force marks her as a child destined for creative accomplishment. Delia, the protagonist of "Sweat," prefigures Janie in her use of visual metaphors to re-evaluate her marriage. "She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way" (957). This visual realization grants Delia the strength to defy her abusive husband. "The Gilded Six-Bits" presents the story of Missie May, unable to see through the shining currency to recognize its meager value; this mis-sight leads her to an affair with the man who owns the false coins, nearly ruining her marriage. Interestingly, her husband Joe finally forgives her when her son is born and turns out to be "'de spittin image'" (995) of Joe himself. Only visual proof of paternity can erase his anger.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in many ways a pre-text for *Their Eyes*, examines many of the same issues of voice and identity with a male protagonist. But though John Pearson, like Janie Crawford, struggles to establish a self, he does not employ her rhetoric of sight. In fact, his white boss specifically associates him with blindness as an explanation for John's lack of foresight:

"Of course you did not know. Because God has given to all men the gift of blindness. That is to say that He has cursed but few with vision. Ever hear tell of a happy prophet? This old world wouldn't roll on the way He started it if men could see. Ha! In fact, I think God Himself was looking off when you went and got yourself born." (86)

Not only is John a result of God's blindness, but John consistently fails to see his way, particularly in failing to pick up on Hattie's use of conjure tricks to entrap him into a second marriage. The vision in the novel belongs to his first wife, Lucy. She is the one whose "large bright eyes looked thru and beyond him and saw too much" (112). Lucy, far more self-aware and perceptive than John, harnesses the power of vision so successfully that her visions live on after her death. Interestingly, when John finally does attain a degree of vision, it proves highly ambiguous and problematic, leading to his death when he drives his car into a railroad crossing: "He drove on but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward" (167). Lacking Lucy's ability to put her visual power to practical use, John fatally blinds himself to his surroundings and pays the ultimate price for his inability to see. Here Hurston sets up her paradigm: Vision must be embodied, one must see outwardly as well as inwardly.

Hurston establishes the full power of the visual in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Initially subjected to the defining and objectifying power of a communal gaze, Janie, unlike John Pearson, learns to employ vision in ways that are self-affirming rather than self-sacrificing. Returning to Eatonville at the novel's start, Janie finds herself in a position very familiar to her: the object that all eyes are upon. When she approaches, the people are full of hostile questions to which they "hoped the answers were cruel and strange" (4). But when she keeps on walking, refusing to stop and acquiesce to their voyeuristic desires, talk becomes specularization: "The porch couldn't talk for looking." The men notice her "firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt." The women focus on the "faded shirt and muddy overalls." Looking at her body, the men see her as sexed; for the women, gazing on her apparel, she is gendered. In both cases, it seems, Janie vanishes. The men define her as female body parts and the women deny her feminine identity. While the female resentment of her attire may seem less intrusive than the male x-ray vision, both looks constitute "mass cruelty" (2). Yet having set up Janie as spectacle, Hurston then illuminates the positive potential of vision in the ensuing interchange with Pheoby. Here, the visual takes on a different tone. Just as voice, according to Kaplan, becomes a kind of double-edged sword, so can vision—particularly when shared between friends—both specularize and affirm. Pheoby tells Janie, "'Gal you sho looks *good.* … Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood'" (4). What she sees is presence, not absence. To look like a woman is to look good, a way of visualizing which does not fixate on sexual anatomy but which allows for materiality. She *shows* her womanhood, a far different sight than that gazed upon by the men, who see not Janie's presence but their own desire, desire which her body is expected to satisfy.

The materiality of Janie's body as an object of desire has, of course, determined much of her history. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, presumably wants to marry her based on what he sees, though her own eyes tell her something very different: "'He look like some old skullhead in de grave yard'" (13). But her vision lacks authority; despite what her eyes tell her, she is married off to him, defeated by Nanny's powerful story of her own oppression which seems to give her the right to impose her will upon Janie. Having "'save[d] de text,'" Nanny uses language to desecrate Janie's vision of the pear tree (16). Joe Starks, Janie's next husband, is likewise attracted to her beauty: "He stopped and looked hard, and then he asked her for a cool drink of water." This time, Janie does not submit passively to this specularization, and tries to look back, to return the gaze, pumping the water "until she got a good look at the man" (26). But her look still lacks the controlling power of the male gaze, what hooks calls the ability to "change reality." At this point, Janie has difficulty even seeing reality, as is evidenced by her inability to see through Joe Starks. She takes "a lot of looks at him and she was proud of what she saw. Kind of portly, like rich white folks" (32). What Janie sees is whiteness, and her valuation of this sets her on a path that will take twenty years to reverse. Looking at Joe's silk shirt, she overlooks his language of hierarchy, his desire to be a big voice. She has privileged the wrong kind of sight, a vision that fails to see into blackness and thus fails to see through language.

Still, Janie is not entirely fooled. Joe does "not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (28). Janie thus gives up a vision she has seen—that of the pear tree—in favor of one she can only imagine: horizons, chance, and change. In allowing herself to be swayed by his language, she fails to notice that his rhetoric is that of speech, not vision. Joe only speaks; he does not see. Consequently, Janie's own vision deteriorates even further. Having initially recognized that Joe does not represent "sun-up and pollen," she later manages to convince herself that he does: "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (31). Stubbornly, she tries to force Joe into her vision, possibly to justify running off with him. Convincing herself to see what is not there leads Janie into an unequal marriage in which she is expected to sit on a "high chair" (58), an infantilizing position where she can overlook the world and yet also be subjected to its envious eyes.

But Joe has a problem, for while he wants to put Janie on display in order to reap the benefit of reflected glory as her owner, this is precisely the position which is threatened by the eyes of other men. He wants her to be both present and absent, both visible and invisible, a task he attempts to accomplish by insisting that she keep her hair tied up in a head rag because he sees the other men not just "figuratively wallowing in it" (51) but literally touching it, and she "was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (52). Joe wants to engage privately in scopophilia within a public forum, without subjecting Janie herself to this public gaze. Once she is fixed by gazes other than his own, he loses his exclusive ownership of her body. As Lorde notes, while visibility entails vulnerability, it can also be a source of great strength, a characteristic Joe certainly does not want to see in Janie. But the situation reflects more than Joe's concern about Janie's gaining cultural power; Janie's visibility also invokes a classic Freudian scenario. Laura Mulvey, in her groundbreaking psychoanalytic study "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," notes that the female figure, beyond providing pleasure for the looker, also implies a certain threat: "her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure…. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of the men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (21). Indeed, Joe's greatest anxiety is not focused on Janie's body but on his own. He wants to have the dominant position, but without being visually objectified by the viewers. "The more his back ached and his muscle dissolved into fat and the fat melted off his bones the more fractious he became with Janie. Especially in the store. The more people in there the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (73–74).

But the racial situation problematizes this notion of woman as icon, which presumes looking to be a masculine act. The cultural permutations of the significance of the gaze within the African American community challenge a strictly Freudian reading. If looking is an act of political defiance, it cannot be exclusively associated with black masculinity, particularly given the long history of black female activism and resistance. When Janie challenges Joe, she does so not just to defend her female identity—"'Ah'm uh woman every inch of me'" (75)—but also to protest against Joe's almost constant oppression. Joe, with his prosperity and seemingly white values, fails to realize that his mouth is not all-powerful, that, despite his favorite expression, "I god," he is not divine. His centrality as mayor and store owner renders him even more vulnerable to specularization than Janie, and he falls prey to a kind of reversed Freudian schema of the gaze which entails serious repercussions for his political power.

Having set up the dynamics of the body as visualized object, Joe becomes its victim, as Janie linguistically performs the castration of which she is the visual reminder. As she tells him publicly, "'When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life,'" her pictorial language renders it impossible for him to deny the vision she creates. He tries to erase the image by questioning her speech. "'Wha—whut's dat you said?'" It doesn't work, however, for Walter taunts him, "'You heard her, you ain't blind.'" This comment highlights the interconnection between hearing and seeing; to hear is to see. And yet, given the words of her insult, Joe might as well be blind, for Janie has, in fact, revealed his lack of visual difference. By not using a visual metaphor in this case, she emphasizes that there is nothing there to see. She bares his body to the communal gaze, not only denying his masculinity but displaying his lack to other men: "She had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing" (75). Feminized by the visual dynamics that he has established, Joe dies, unable to withstand the gaze which erases his masculinity and identifies him as empty armor. Not only is it impossible for him to continue as mayor under these circumstances, it is impossible for him to continue. Joe has no life once denied both sexual and political power.

Though Hurston uses the visual to expose the vulnerability of a phallocentrism which abuses women, she also recognizes its empowering potential. In transforming the visual into a tool of female power, Hurston reclaims the power of the visual as a vehicle for examining African American women's experiences. After all, if one erases vision, one erases race, which is culturally visualized by the physical body, the sign of visual difference. As Michelle Wallace notes, "How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual" ("Modernism" 40). Racial visibility as a marker of difference allows black women to "show" their womanhood.

Yet, as Joe's experience makes clear, this must be a particular kind of vision, a way of seeing which expands rather than limits understanding. Despite Joe's entrapment in his own gaze, the novel is replete with examples of the affirmative quality of the visual. Janie's attempts to define a self originate with the act of looking. Her "conscious life" begins with her vision of the pear tree, leading to her sexual awakening. Having felt called to "gaze on a mystery" (10), she beholds a "revelation" in the bees and flowers. She seeks her own place in the picture, searching for "confirmation of the voice and vision." Looking down the road, she sees a "glorious being" whom, in her "former blindness," she had known as "shiftless Johnny Taylor." But the "golden dust of pollen" which "beglamored his rags and her eyes" changes her perspective (11). Johnny Taylor's kiss, espied by Nanny, sets Janie's course in motion. Whether or not Johnny Taylor represents a better possibility is both impossible to determine and irrelevant; what matters is Janie's realization that her fate is linked to her vision, though the recognition will lead her astray until she learns effectively to interpret what she sees.

This vision, after her mistake in mis-seeing Joe Starks, is finally fulfilled when she meets Tea Cake, a man who is willing to display himself rather than subject others to his defining gaze. When Janie says, "'Look lak Ah seen you somewhere,'" he replies, "'Ah'm easy tuh see on Church Street most any day or night'" (90–91). By denying any anxiety in thus being viewed, Tea Cake transforms sight from a controlling, defining gaze into a personal introduction, demystifying himself by inviting inspection. In fact, Tea Cake cautions her about the importance of looking closely in the ensuing checkers game, challenging her claim that he has no right to jump her king because "'Ah wuz lookin' off when you went and stuck yo' men right up next tuh mine. No fair!'" Tea Cake answers, "'You ain't supposed tuh look off, Mis' Starks. It's de biggest part uh de game tuh watch out!'" (92). His response underscores the importance of watching, of using one's vision not to fix and specularize but to see and think, to understand. Consequently, Janie realizes that he "could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101), a man who can confirm her initial vision. She defines him with visual metaphors: "He was a glance from God." This metaphor highlights Tea Cake's connection to the visual; he recognizes the need to combine voice with understanding, remarking that Janie needs "'tellin' and showin' '" (102) to believe in love.

But Janie does not need simply to find a man capable of assimilating voice and vision, she needs to learn for herself how to formulate a self which is not predicated upon oppression. She finds the task particularly challenging because her racial identity is founded upon invisibility, upon her inability to see herself. The photograph which reveals her color, her difference, divides her from her previous notion of the identity of sameness: "'Before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.'" To be black is to be not just different but absent, for Janie looks at the photograph asking, "'Where is me? Ah don't see me'" (9). Both blackness and femininity are culturally predicated upon lack; thus Janie needs to learn to show her womanhood and to find visible presence in blackness. Priscilla Wald has suggested that Janie's problem with seeing herself stems from her "white eyes": "The white eyes with which Janie looks see the black self as absent, that is, do not see the black self at all" (83). This is a particularly important point, for it indicates that Janie needs not just vision, but black vision—black eyes. Vision, which initially divides her from herself, must then provide the means for re-inventing a self, one in which racial identity adds wholeness rather than division. To deny either her blackness or her whiteness is to deny the specificity of her being, for her body is the site of the physical evidence of white oppression and a partially white origin. The answer is not to retreat into colorlessness but to reconstitute the definition of the self into something that acknowledges the conditions of her physical being: the visible evidence of her whiteness and her blackness, the heritage of slavery and sexual abuse.

Janie takes the first step toward acquiring this visual sense of self in response to Joe's oppression. "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes" (73). She sees the self that prostrates itself before Jody as her shadow, and this realization acts on her "like a drug," offering an escape from an oppressive life. In order to move from passive spectator to active doer, however, she needs to take that vision further. The act of seeing must become active and affirmative before she can re-integrate the disparate parts of her identity into one unified whole. As Andrew Lakritz has written, "Some of the most powerful moments in Zora Neale Hurston's writings occur when a figure in the narrative is represented as watching events unfold, when such acts of looking become constitutive of the entire question of identity" (17). But looking itself does not automatically constitute identity; one must learn how to do it. Barbara Johnson's much cited analysis of Janie's recognition of her division into inside and outside also can be viewed as an experience in learning to use the visual. Johnson identifies Janie's realization that the spirit of the marriage has left the bedroom and moved into the parlor as an "externalization of the inner, a metaphorically grounded metonymy," while the following paragraph where Janie sees her image of Jody tumble off a shelf "presents an internalization of the outer, or a metonymically grounded metaphor." This moment leads Janie to a voice which "grows not out of her identity but out of her division into inside and outside. Knowing how not to mix them is knowing that articulate language requires the co-presence of two distinct poles, not their collapse into oneness" (Johnson 212). If, indeed, the moment leads her to voice, it does not lead to a voice of self-assertion, as Janie remains silent under Joe's oppressive control for several more years.

I would suggest that the moment does not engender Janie's voice so much as it moves her toward a way of visualizing her experience which will, in time, lead her toward a picturing voice. In imagining her marriage as living in the parlor, she creates, as Johnson notes, a metonymy. But her metaphor of Joe as statue is also a metaphor infused with vision:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be…. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (67–68)

The significance of this moment lies not just in Janie's recognition of the division between inside and outside but also in the ability to turn her back on the image and "look further." No longer content with surface vision, Janie is learning to "look further," a necessary precondition for finding an expressive voice.

Joe's death offers her further opportunity to use this knowledge as she fixes her gaze upon herself. Janie goes to the mirror and looks "hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (83). This scene illustrates why vision is so crucial to Hurston's work. Recalling Butler's comment that the "visual field" is a "racial formation," one sees Hurston establishing precisely that. In looking hard at her "skin and features," Janie looks hard at her interracial body, seeing it now not as different but as handsome. She uses her own vision to find beauty and value in her visually inscribed racial identity. She then burns her head rags, symbol of Joe's attempts to deny her beauty and to hide her from the communal gaze while subjecting her to his own. Displaying her abundant hair, presumably another indication of her racially mixed heritage, brings her still closer to an affirmation of her visual self, a self that celebrates rather than denying the mark of race—of both races. Kaja Silverman asserts that the "eye can confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain. It can also put what is alien or inconsequential into contact with what is most personal and psychically significant" (227). Even before Janie gains the aid of Tea Cake's loving eye, her own eyes confer love upon her body as she begins to assimilate what has often seemed an alien world into her own psyche.

Janie transforms her understanding of color so that the sting of her original recognition of her photograph, "'Aw! aw! Ah'm colored!'" (9), can be alleviated and reversed by recognizing the visual beauty of color. The evening she meets Tea Cake, she watches the moon rise, "its amber fluid … drenching the earth" (95). This scene reveals the darkness of night to be full of color, transcending the stark blackness of the sky and whiteness of the moon. Hurston thus presents color as a full range of variation and beauty. Janie starts wearing blue because Tea Cake likes to see her in it, telling Pheoby not only that visual mourning should not last longer than grief, but that "'de world picked out black and white for mournin' '" (107–108). By specifically associating mourning with black and white, Hurston subtly suggests that going beyond the color binary moves one from grief to happiness, from mourning and loss to fulfillment. She further challenges the black-white binary with the episode after the storm in the Everglades, when Tea Cake is forcibly conscripted into burying bodies. The white overseers insist that the workers "'examine every last one of 'em and find out if they's white or black'" (162). This ridiculous and horrific command inspires Tea Cake to comment, "'Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law'" (163). The suggestion that God needs the aid of coffins to "see" racial difference again highlights the absurdity of seeing the world only in terms of black and white. By tying vision so intricately to race, Hurston offers a way out of the oppositional hierarchy of both.8

Thus Hurston destabilizes the visual racial binary, and Janie learns a new respect for color and for her own image. She restores the image that was desecrated by the photograph, when Tea Cake tells her to look in the mirror so she can take pleasure from her looks. "Fortunately," says Silverman, "no look ever takes place once and for all" (223). As Hurston well understands, looking is not a static activity. To "transform the value," as Silverman puts it, of what is seen, one needs to use one's life-experience in order to see it better. Having stood up to her husband, survived the gossip implicating her in his death, taken over the business, and dared to consider a lover, Janie learns to transform her gaze into one that accepts and values her own image.

After learning to use her vision to value herself, Janie is ready to take the next step: using vision to find God. The title episode of the novel reveals the full importance of the power of sight and of being an active looker; watching God is an active rather than a passive enterprise.

They sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (151)

Like Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, Hurston re-visions the old white man with a long beard. Instead, one approaches God not just in darkness but by looking *through* darkness, to see God where others see blackness. In so doing, she enables a kind of vision that deifies darkness, replacing the emptiness with presence, presence in blackness. At the height of the storm, Janie tells Tea Cake, "'If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk'" (151). Since she can "see" the light in darkness, neither it nor death holds any fear for her. By having her characters watch God in darkness, Hurston redefines rationalist and masculine control of the gaze, transforming scopophilia into spirituality. Her enabled gaze does not make women specularizable, for it takes place in darkness; rather, it makes God viewable and blackness visible. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, the midwife Lone, trying to find out what the men plan to do to the women at the convent, sits in the dark to read the signs: "Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself" (273). Learning how to see—particularly, learning how to see in darkness—takes on special meaning for African American women. One comes to God not through light but through the ability to see in the dark.

But Hurston's world is not solely visual; material bodies exist tactily as well as visually, and color is not always beautiful, as the historical forces of slavery and oppression can be read on Janie's body. She is the product of two generations of rape, one of them interracial. She suffers physically for her interracial body when Tea Cake beats her to display his ownership in the face of Mrs. Turner's theories of Janie's superiority due to her light skin. The bruises, of course, are clearly evident precisely because of that light skin, as Sop-de-Bottom enviously remarks, "'Uh person can see every place you hit her'" (140). These marks inscribe both visually and physically the full implications of her racial identity as well as the violence that brought it into being. Just as black women cannot ignore the visual, neither can they escape the tactile, a physical language which highlights the material racist and sexist abuse of the body.9 As Sharon Davie argues, Hurston's bodily metaphors "acknowledge the tactile, the physical, which Western culture devalues" (454). But Hurston does more than acknowledge the tactile; she *reveals* it. In Hurston's world, the mark of violence is seen, making the tactile visual. Though she celebrates the power of vision, she has no illusions that it can erase or replace the discourse of violence and racism. Rather, it documents, for all to see, the effects of brutality.

Janie's act of killing is an act of physical self-defense to protect the body that Tea Cake has restored to her. Yet even this highly tactile response has a visual component. She waits for a sign from the sky, a visual indication that God will relent and spare Tea Cake's life, but "the sky stayed hard looking and quiet" (169). I find it telling that this is a daytime supplication, as Janie seeks to find a message "beyond blue ether's bosom," waiting for a "star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout." This daylight sky appears much less accessible to her searching eyes than the blackness of the storm. The God sought in darkness evokes a reaffirmation of love, but this light (skinned?) God forces murder. Lack of visual contact spells doom, and Tea Cake's vision consequently suffers to the point where the "fiend in him must kill and Janie was the only thing living he saw" (175). Thus Tea Cake's death both saves Janie's physical body and erases his false vision.

Her final test involves learning to integrate voice and vision in a different form of self-defense. The trial scene reconstitutes Janie as speaker rather than object. The spectators are there not to watch but to listen. Janie's verbal defense succeeds because she "makes them see," a phrase repeated three times in six sentences:

She had to go way back to let them know how she and Tea Cake had been with one another so they could *see* she could never shoot Tea Cake out of malice.

She tried to make them *see* how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him…. She made them *see* how she couldn't ever want to be rid of him. (178; emphasis added)

Despite critical concern with the narrator replacing Janie's voice at this crucial moment, we must recognize that Janie has made them see, as she has already made the reader see, that voice at this moment is subordinate to the ability to visualize, an effect that may be heightened by Hurston's deflection of Janie's story. We don't need to hear her, since we can see her story. She manages to refute the implications of the black male spectators, that "'dem white mens wuzn't goin tuh do nothin' tuh no woman dat look lak her'" (179), and they turn their anger against Mrs. Turner's brother who puts "himself where men's wives could look at him" (181). But Janie's looks have not been directed at him; she has been too busy learning to visualize to waste time specularizing.

Consequently, she returns home to discover "'dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along'" (182). Having learned to make presence out of absence, she can now not only re-visualize Tea Cake, whose "memory made pictures of love and light against the wall," but can also call "in her soul to come and see" (184). In thus successfully employing a visualized voice, Janie becomes both spectator and participant in her own life. To speak the body, for an African American woman, means to recognize its visual racial difference as well as affirming its sexual identity. Hurston's mind-pictures and seeing-voices reclaim the physical world of pear trees and the beauty of the visible presence of blackness. As Hurston herself noted, pictorial language is of primary importance in black discourse, where everything is "illustrated. So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" ("Characteristics" 24). By filling Janie "full of that oldest human longing—self revelation" (*Their Eyes* 6), Hurston presents a text of "revelation"—with all of its visual implications. Her hieroglyphics reflect a community of people whose world is their canvas and whose lives and bodies are pictured in living color.

She thus provides a model for reconciling voice and vision, for transforming black bodies from museum pieces or ethnographic objects into embodied voices, by recasting spectacle as visual, a move away from passive sensationalism to active participation. Hortense Spillers notes of the Du Boisian double-consciousness that "it is also noteworthy that his provocative claims … crosses [sic] their wires with the specular and spectacular: the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining being seen through the eyes of another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze" (143). In Hurston's hands, looking is indeed a performative act. In fact, it becomes a linguistic performance which affirms bodily presence, reversing Fanon's claim that, in the white world, "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (110). Hurston, as Priscilla Wald so aptly puts it, "redesignates 'color' as performance in a process that draws her readers into the dynamics of 'coloration'" (87). Through the use of hieroglyphics, she reconstitutes women as active and colored performers. Vision, so often a means of fixing and silencing African Americans, can also provide the means to foreground the body without surrendering the voice. As the title of Hurston's novel indicates, her concern goes beyond presenting an individual woman's journey to self-awareness; her accomplishment is nothing less than redefining African American rhetoric, rendering it verbal and visual.

Clarke, Deborah. "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 599–613. Quoted as "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2008. *Bloom's Literature*. www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=MCVZNH013&SingleRecord=True. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017

#### Resistance, Rebirth, and Renewal in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Date:** 2009  
On *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston  
**Author:** Deborah James  
**From:** *Rebirth and Renewal*, Bloom's Literary Themes.

These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now the sun and the bossman were gone so the skins felt powerful and human. (1)

Zora Neale Hurston's writing—anthropological and literary—aimed at giving voice to a community which society often rendered as "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences." Within her texts, African Americans, particularly ordinary working people, live and breathe. That gift of life in her texts is perhaps her most important contribution to American letters. And nowhere is that talent displayed more ably, more poetically, than in her most celebrated work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While its major focus is the life of its main character, Janie, it also brings to life again a community that is vital despite the enforced enclosure of race. Within the communities she constructs, African Americans have agency; they have lives full of laughter, work, envy, love, resentment, sometimes violence, pride, curiosity—a whole range of human activity and concerns. They also have a lively, expressive language augmented by Hurston's own gifts of poetic expression. This novel demonstrates how people, collectively and individually, create their lives—resisting external categories and achieving renewal. Janie, the protagonist of the novel, is Hurston's most significant portrait of an individual who achieves renewal through her ability to resist the definitions of others and her openness to the sometimes-painful process of rebirth.

Since its reappearance on the American literary landscape in the 1970s, critics and readers of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* agree that the novel chronicles Janie's self-discovery. She has several key relationships within the story—first with her grandmother, the other three with each of the men she marries. Discussions of the text identify Janie's marriages as crucial junctures for her—the moments when her discoveries about herself are most apparent and intense. From this vantage point, her most important lessons would seem to be lessons about love—understanding what love is *not* through her first two marriages, initially to Logan Kellicks, then to Joe Starks (or Jody as Janie called him). Janie finally learns what love *is* during her last relationship with Tea Cake (Vergible Woods). If, however, this is the only concern of the novel, all that it offers its readers, it would have ceased to be of critical interest some time ago. In fact, some early reviewers, Richard Wright and Sterling Brown for example, dismissed her tale as worthless because it seemed to ignore the political and social realities of the times and to be limited to only these domestic concerns. What these readers missed was Hurston's implicit challenge to the stereotype of the day that said black people were incapable of true romance because, as a race, they were limited in human feelings and understanding. Fortunately, this issue has virtually vanished for contemporary readers.

But there is more to the novel than this exploration of romantic love. As eminent African American literary critic and scholar Henry Louis Gates observes, a wide range of critics continue to discover new aspects of the novel that they contemplate and discuss with delight if not always in agreement (Gates, *Their Eyes* 164). For example, while most contemporary readers agree that Janie does gain valuable knowledge about the nature of love through her experiences with the men in her life, some critics, such as Mary Helen Washington (Washington, "I Love …") argue that Janie's self-discoveries are limited by her relationships with men. While Janie's relationships provide experiences through which she learns and grows, they are not the full measure of that growth. Janie's discoveries result in renewal because of everything she learns about life and the courage with which she seeks to live it on her own terms. On her return to Eatonville, she shares her tale and her hard-won understanding with her best friend, Pheoby.

It's a known fact Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there.

Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves." (192)

Through her experiences, Janie discovers that in order to achieve real knowledge she must resist external limitations and expectations, becoming a full participant in shaping her own life. Thus she is reborn as a whole person.

Early on, Janie demonstrates her resistance to external definition in the episode where she fails to recognize herself in a photograph as the one black child among the other children who live on the estate. Although that failure has some troubling connotations (i.e., is Hurston suggesting some negative response to being identified as black?), it actually signals her resistance to the stigma associated with the racial stereotypes of the day. As she relays this incident to Pheoby, she explains her response in terms of the freedom and equality she experienced as a child and how it differed from the typical experience of blacks in the pre-civil rights era. Her surprise about her racial identity does not seem linked to any personal negative feelings about it. Rather, as the rest of the novel attests, it indicates the difference between how Janie thinks of herself (not limited in terms of race and class) and how other people see her and expect her to respond. Janie's resistance to the facts of her poverty and race, to what those *should* mean in terms of her feelings about her "place," forecast her reaction to her grandmother's efforts to provide security for her by way of marriage. From the beginning, Janie's judgments and desires are shaped by her own feelings about the circumstances of her life rather than by others' expectations. This leads to a deep rift between Janie and her grandmother.

When Nanny observes Janie's sexual awakening (kissing Johnny Taylor across the fence), she is catapulted into action for Janie's safety. Janie, however, understands neither how she is endangered nor what the nature of the danger is. Everything seems to be happening too abruptly. Like a dreamer awakening, Janie is temporarily blinded by the glories of a new world, in which sensuality, sexuality, and love seem to equal marriage. But Nanny, born into slavery, victim of her master's lust and her mistress's rage, knows how vulnerable Janie is from this moment on. She argues that Janie must have the protection of marriage and the security of possessions to prevent what Nanny believes will otherwise be her inevitable fate.

Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' things in yo' face. And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa' you … (20).

These terrors have no reality for Janie though. In her mind, Nanny has transformed almost unaccountably into someone forcing Janie to submit to her will against Janie's own instincts. And while she tries to accept Nanny's vision as her own, it does not fit. But Nanny does not comprehend Janie's view, dismissing it as insubstantial and naïve. Janie longs for "things sweet wid mah marriage …" (24). Nanny instead insists that marriage to Logan Kellicks is the perfect protection. He is an older man—settled, a widow, and, most importantly, a landowner (sixty acres). While Nanny's fears for Janie are real and her efforts to provide for her are loving, her refusal to take into account Janie's feelings confuses and angers Janie. In Janie's view, her marriage to Kellicks diverts her from her own fledgling attempt to explore her world and herself. In marrying Logan, Janie allows her life to be dictated by Nanny's view, with negative consequences. Later in life Janie even decides that,

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*…. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things* (89).

To Janie, Nanny's well-intentioned protection, in fact, aborts her first attempts to achieve womanhood.

While Janie's resistance to Nanny's plan for her life has been almost entirely intuitive (she has little experience on which to base her fears), in her union with Logan, she begins to acquire lived experience on which to base her growing understanding. First, however, she must resist Logan Kellicks himself, the next threat to her development.

Like Nanny, Logan tries to impose his view of what she should be on Janie. Though he initially seems smitten with her (i.e., chopping wood for her, etc.), when she fails to immediately reciprocate, he becomes angry. He thinks she should be grateful that he has rescued her from what he sees as the humiliation of her poverty. When she refuses to behave with gratitude, he begins to demand servitude, first demanding that she chop her own wood, then purchasing a mule specifically for her to help him plow the field. Ironically, this is the fate that Nanny thinks she has protected Janie from.

So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly…. She knew things nobody had ever told her…. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked down the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Jamie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman. (25)

Janie begins to understand through her own experience with Logan what she does not want. Moreover, she has proof that she should follow her own instincts, so when Joe Starks arrives, representing the horizons she wants to explore, it takes very little time for her to decide to leave Logan. Thus she embarks on her first reinvention of herself. But she does not simply leave Logan to attach herself to Joe. In fact, the morning she walks off, she is poised on the brink of self-discovery: "A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her…. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good." (32)

Joe's arrival has reawakened Janie's previous yearnings, especially her desire for a relationship in which she can know and be known more fully. Once again she is disappointed. Like Nanny and Logan, Joe is intent on Janie enacting the role he has assigned her. He is unwilling to consider her concerns or feelings in any real way. He is convinced that he knows best. Janie must again resist someone else's idea of who she should be in order to derive a clearer understanding of who she is.

In fact, Janie's most sustained resistance occurs within the boundaries of her marriage to Joe. In the beginning, she thinks she has found a partner with whom to share her exploration of the world. Joe Starks is a man with a vision; he is heading to a black town in its infancy to be part of its growth and development from the ground up, and he is taking Janie with him. But Joe believes he must tell her what she *should* think, what she *should* feel despite Janie's assertions that women think too. In a heated exchange, he tells her that women "just thinks they's thinking." (71) Janie retreats into silence—but silent resistance rather than submission.

She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody [Joe] know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them…. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (72)

So Janie's first response to Joe's domination is to preserve her true self from him in silence. Her outside self does what Joe demands, while her inside self remains hidden from him. It is during this sustained silence that she begins to observe more carefully the contrast between this outside, which conforms in some measure to expectation, and the inside, which harbors her real feelings. In this silence, the gap between the two states of being grows.

But such a split cannot be maintained forever. One day, when Joe derides her in front of the usual crowd in the store, something snaps. She retaliates by scorning him publicly, describing his impotence: "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (79). Janie moves from passive resistance to open rebellion, using the voice she has discovered to devastating effect. But even when Joe faces death, he will not *hear* Janie.

"Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me."

"Shut up. Ah wish thunder and lightnin' would kill you" (86).

Though her attempts at reconciliation fail, she has her say. More than that, though, in the aftermath of Joe's death, she once again takes stock. Janie achieves one level of self-knowledge when she left Logan. At Joe's death, she gains another. The young girl is now completely gone, replaced by a handsome, confident woman, able to present her "starched and ironed face, forming it into just what people wanted to see" (87). This mask becomes a protective cover while a new Janie develops within this cocoon.

The community sees from her what it expects to see, while Janie enjoys her first real freedom. She begins this process of renewal by first divesting herself of the head rags that symbolized Joe's domination. But she continues by questioning herself deeply. She asks herself what she really wants, then listens in stillness for the answer. It is in this process that she discovers her antipathy toward Nanny. In this stillness, she discovers "… a jewel down inside herself" seeking its mate in some undiscovered other (90). In this state of contemplation, Janie also discovers how much she enjoys her own freedom. Although the first two relationships in her life had looked like freedom, each became a different kind of bondage. So Janie is very cautious about avoiding that mistake again. She is also coming to the end of her willingness to even provide the outside demanded by others. When Pheoby presses her to consider remarrying, Janie responds:

    "Tain't dat Ah worries over Joe's death, Pheoby. Ah jus' loves dis freedom."  
"Sh-sh-sh! Don't let nobody hear you say dat Janie. Folks will say you ain't sorry he's gone.

    "Let 'em say whut dey wants tuh, Phoeby. To my thinking mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer than grief" (93).

Thus between Jody's death and her next relationship, Janie emerges as a new woman, ready and able to make her own decisions about her life. She knows the consequences of allowing other people to dictate the terms of one's own life. It is in that state of readiness that she has her most life-altering encounter. She meets Tea Cake, her mentor and the other whose internal jewel matches hers.

From the beginning, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is unlike the previous ones. This relationship is marked by play, a level of mutual honesty and self-disclosure that Janie's previous relationships lacked. Though she's cautious about her new freedom, her banter with him during their first meeting is easy and relaxed. It is Janie who sets the boundaries of their relationship early on. She decides when and where she engages with him. Even her efforts to avoid the eyes of the town at first give way very soon to their evolving relationship. Janie's anxiety that he is a young man out to make a fool of her is quelled by Tea Cake's accurate reading of her fear. He sets out then to prove that his interest in her is genuine and not limited to either property or sex.

A turning point in their relationship comes after he has returned to her after having disappeared earlier with the two hundred dollars she had hidden as security in case he abandoned her on the road. Upon his return, he describes to her in detail what he has done with the money; she asks why he did not take her with him. Like Logan, but especially like Joe, he voices the idea that she is too refined to be exposed to low life. Not only does she resist this view openly, but she also tells him that from that moment on she expects to "partake wid everything…." (124). Tea Cake accepts this idea and tells her, "Honey since you loose me and gimme privilege tuh tell yuh about mahself, Ah'll tell yuh …" (125). Thus Tea Cake begins his role as guide for Janie, sharing all the dimensions of his life with her and thus inviting her to do the same. Janie participates in everything as much as she chooses to. Tea Cake does ask her to do things for him: to go with him "on the muck" (work in the Florida Everglades), to live on only what he can provide for them, to work side by side with him in the fields. The difference is that he invites her into his life, the better to know him. In fact, he presents the idea of working the fields together as a way for them to spend even more time together. Janie accepts. When Mrs. Turner befriends Janie only to try to turn her against Tea Cake, he asks Janie to keep her away from the house, but he does not blame her when she is not completely able to avoid the association. It is a sign of the severity of his illness toward the end of the novel when he demands that she stay in his sight and begins to accuse her of disloyalty.

With Tea Cake Janie tries to inhabit a new identity, one not limited by class or external expectations. In fact, at one point she thinks,

… of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh(ed) to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others. The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest (134).

She learns other skills besides—she can fish and hunt and shoot. She is also a good cook. But most of all, she feels free to be herself—without constraint, without pretense.

Her relationship to Tea Cake can be said to be problematic, especially to the contemporary eye. Tea Cake "slaps her around" when he finds out that Mrs. Turner is trying to set Janie up with her brother. He tells the other men that he does this not because of Janie's behavior but to show Mrs. Turner that he controls his home. So even within this love match, Janie is not altogether free of the violence and controlling behavior that some men consider their right where women are concerned. Yet, on the muck, she is free to work or not, to dance, laugh, fight, cry, think, make love—to give expression to a full range of emotions. This freedom stems from Janie's sense of self-sufficiency, from her confidence in her ability to take care of herself. She still has the home and store that Joe's death has left her and money in the bank. She returns to this place readily after losing Tea Cake. But in her life with him she experiences a sense of completion, of being deeply loved and of loving deeply.

At the end of the day, however, Janie has only herself and her hard-won knowledge to rely on. In the last view of Janie that Hurston provides, she is again taking stock. But this time when she looks inside, she thinks, "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see" (193). Janie is unafraid of the journey. She knows who she is now for sure.

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