

Their eyes were watching god narrative essay

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, shows the development of an African-American woman living in the 1920s and 1930s as she searches for her true identity. Janie was a half-white, half-black girl growing up in Florida in the early 1930's, living with her grandmother, struggling to find her place in life. Janie's transformation throughout the book shows a change through language and the development of Janie's voice through the different stages of her life.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a narrative about one woman's quest to free herself from repression and explore her own identity; this is the story of Janie Crawford and her journey for self-knowledge and fulfillment. Hurston's narrative focuses on the emergence of a female self in a male-dominated world, she tells her magnificent story of romantic love against the background of church and extra church modes of expression. Understanding this fact helps to explain those sections of the narrative that have been said to have no meaning beyond their entertainment value (Hemenway 218).

Janie's life is like a sermon waiting to be told to the African-American women, Nanny states this in the beginning of the novel. " Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a crook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in the world.

So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you (16). Janie transforms many times as she undergoes the process of self-discovery

as she changes through her experiences with three different men. Through her marriages with Logan, Joe, and then Tea Cake she figures out who she is and what she wants in life. Every one of her marriages has a different outcome on her capability of finding that voice. Finding her voice was a very difficult thing for Janie Crawford to do.

She had spent the majority of her life finding her own voice and this path was not easy for her to do, however, it takes a lot of determination to speak up. Deborah Clarke says, "Janie seeks for a voice which can picture, which can make you see," and suggests that Zora Neale Hurston, the author, is more interested in a voice that uses visual imagery to redefine African-American rhetoric, than the presentation of one woman's journey toward self-awareness (599, 611). The power of Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers on her ability to fix extant cultural values in language and in the work of art.

Like the preacher, Hurston's artistic gift "consists in discovering the not-yet-discovered subsistent values and meanings that make up [her text] object in the creative act which is the relation of that object in and through language (Vivas 1073-74; Fontenot 38-41). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* brings the meanings and values of the culture to its participants' attention. Janie's early life begins with her living with her grandmother, Nanny. Janie's mother had left when she was young because her mother was ashamed of having her at a young age. Nanny and Janie were pretty well off and had the privilege to live in the yard of white folks.

While Janie was growing up she played with the white children. During this stage of her life, she was faced with disapproval from others and was called numerous names, so many that everyone started calling her alphabet, " 'cause so many people had done named me different names. " She then started putting together what she knew of her eccentric identity. One day she saw herself in a photograph and noticed that she looked unlike everyone else and that she had dark skin, and she said, " before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest. From that point in her life, Janie fell into a downward spiral, setting her on the way to discover her own identity in the world. Clarke points out that Hurston uses a symbol of vision in the start of the novel to highlight the significance of visualization starting with Janie's words to Phoeby, " Unless you see the fur, you can't tell a mink from a coon" (599). Clarke sees this as Hurston's way of telling the reader to see the story rather than just hear the story (600). Clarke also sees Hurston as fully establishing the power of the visual because she utilizes " vision in ways that are self-affirming rather than self-sacrificing" (604).

Hurston uses the character of Phoeby to affirm rather than objectify Janie's visual appearance, as suggested by Clarke in which she says, " 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. Janie shows that her womanhood, a far different sight than that gazed upon by the men" (604). The ability to use voice visually provides a literary space for African-American woman to relate their experiences in a world where, as Nanny says, " We don't know nothin' but we see (14).

Clarke states that 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. Chapter two of the book it talks of Janie " 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 (11). I believe this is the point in Janie's life that she realizes that she wants to be free and able to enjoy things in life.

Mesmerized by the bees and the sun Janie experiences her first kiss under this tree by Johnny Taylor. This begins a major point in her life because Nanny seen this inappropriate behavior and says to Janie " Ah don't want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on (13). Nanny arranges for Janie to her marry with Logan Killicks, a young black man who had sixty acres of his own and a house, this was security for a young black woman, although, Janie did not want this for herself, she took the advice of Nanny and married Logan.

When their relationship starts Janie thinks that she has found the kind of life that she has always wanted. In her mind she thought that marriage meant one would find true love and that her husband (Logan) would take good care of her and shows her the love that she has always longed for. However, Logan reveals his expectations of her, and that he wants her to be basically a slave that answers to his every command. When Janie confronted her Nanny, about her love for Logan was non-existing, she told Janie that she needs to learn to love him because he owns his house and all of the land he has.

Nanny also reminds Janie that any young woman would love to have him for this very reason. This is one point of Janie's life that she realizes that although she is married she is still not treated equal in society or her own life as a wife. When Janie decides to leave Logan, she is under the impression that she has met a man (Joe Starks) who will treat her better and show her what life has to offer. Janie's decision to leave with Joe is based on the way she has been previously treated by Logan, who wants to make Janie his personal slave who comes to him on command.

Janie's marriage to Joe Starks makes it easier to develop a stronger voice which proves she has never thrown away her vision of an ideal marriage. Janie and Joe arrive in town Joe begins to show his love and protection for Janie by telling her to dress up and stand in the store all that of the first evening. Joe becomes mayor of Eatonville and is just as determined as Logan was to keep Janie in her proper place. Everybody was coming sort of fixed

up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow; the other women were the gang (41).

Janie accepts this explanation of Joe's love and protection with the faith and obedience in her husband Janie puts on one of new dresses and went to the new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red. Her silken ruffles rustled and muttered about her (41). The porch of Joe Starks store was treated as a sacred space for the men to gossip about one another and the women (Janie) could listen to certain things that were said but she had better not speak on any such matter. She had become a prisoner of the pretty picture of "whut a woman oughta be and do" this is what Joe expected of Janie.

Joe says "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant special for you (28). This all seems to be a dream to Janie because she thinks Joe is treating her with respect and puts her high up on the pedestal within society. However, when Joe slaps Janie for burning the rice and undercooking the fish, she has an internal look at herself and realized, "She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen (72). Joe destroys the last hope of potential love inside Janie's heart; however, this frees Janie to discover what she has never found.

Consequently, while Joe is on his deathbed Janie says to her husband, "Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die...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 (86). "All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo'

voice—dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you (82). Sadly for Joe, Janie's clear thinking has come at an unfortunate time, however she is giving him the possibility of aking things right. However, Joe discards any request for forgiveness to Janie, which only makes Janie stronger as an African-American woman she then tells to the townspeople that " Mah husband is gone from me (87). She says this after she has taken her head rag off and sees herself as a " handsome woman (87). Janie goes to the mirror and looks at herself for the first time and realizes that Joe had hidden her beauty in order to gaze upon her on his own; therefore she burns the head rags and takes down her abundant hair.

Janie's voice develops hugely after Joe dies and now Janie is rich and carefree. Janie buries Joe Starks and later she meets her third husband Vergible Woods... aka... Tea Cake. Clarke, states that " Tea Cake is important for Janie's progression of self visualization because he wants her to see and think; which in turn brings understanding. " Although Racine does show Tea Cake as an encouraging authority similar to Clarke, she also does not focus on Tea Cake for long before showing Janie as acquiring her strongest voice when she chooses life over death at Tea Cake's hands.

Racine shows Janie's voice as limited throughout each of her first two marriages because Janie is not able to make the men see her view of the situation. She also gives examples of how Janie's unhappiness is understood through the narrator and not Janie's actual voice. Janie killed Tea Cake in self-defense to protect the body of a woman who he had made. Although, this act of love seems to be sad and surrounded by hate from many, I think

this may have made Janie a voiceless African-American woman again because of the turmoil that she has endured in her life.

However, when she tells her story to Pheoby, she does not worry about what the women of her town think. Is this just a cover up so that no one will know that she is really hurting deep down inside? Tea Cake is different from the past men in Janie's life and he recognizes that she is different from any woman he has known. Although, he has nothing to offer her but his love and promise to stay with Janie and take care of her this seems to be enough for Janie. Tea Cake starts a new beginning in Janie's life and he immediately lets her know that she does not have to be anyone but herself.

Tea Cake is a man who respects Janie as an intelligent, exciting companion. Janie has finally found the love that she has been hoping for in her past marriages. During the time of Janie's third marriage she actually loves her husband, she feels free to discover new things in her life which she was unable to do in her other marriages. Janie becomes more sociable and wants to go places with her husband Tea Cake; she enjoys working with other people and being treated as an equal. Janie learns to shoot a rifle and later becomes a better shooter than Tea Cake, however, he compliments her for that.

This allows Janie to get her self-respect which she had lost in her previous marriages. Janie's spiritual development begins when she lives with Tea Cake. Consequently, this allows the reader to see that Janie has a tough life whereas; she had to fight back in order to not become inferior to her husband's. She succeeds this point in her life when it becomes of Tea Cake,

where her inner voice starts to arouse. If Janie was truly upset when she returned home then the people would have snickered behind her back, but instead it “ made the women see visions and the...men dreamdreams(147).

This gives the reader an image of the unity between Tea Cake and Janie. Therefore, Janie is now a woman that wants society to know she is legally owned by Tea Cake. Consequently, this is what Janie wants to be owned by Tea Cake. Janie’s final point in her life involves her voice and vision in the matter of self-defense or malice. When Janie is taken to jail for the murder of Tea Cake and then immediately tried in court with blacks and whites to listen and watch wondering what will happen to this Negro woman who has killed a man.

This gives Janie a chance to move forward in her life and telling the truth about the relationship she had with Tea Cake. Janie is a strong African-American woman who survives a horrible hurricane and an attack by a rabid dog resulting in Tea Cake being bitten instead which ultimately causes his mind to examine what’s reality and what’s not. Tea Cake has revealed to Janie that her life is valuable to him as he saves her from the rabid dog, then she must make the ultimate choice of life and death.

Although, very reluctant Janie shoots a rifle that kills Tea Cake, this is the same weapon he taught her how to shoot with for protection; however, she does this with strength and courage which makes it peacefully in knowing that she has done the right thing. Janie has searched twenty-four years for a man like Tea Cake relying heavily on her vision beneath the pear tree. Janie

has experienced what she has always known to exist, she does have a voice and it now speaks with peace and with power of a African-American woman.

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 its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see (193).

Tea Cake can always remain alive within Janie's memory, because now she has full control of the " feeling and thinking" of her mind (193). Janie has hope that inspired her dream to come true, and the completion of an ecstatic and insignificantly delicious pear tree vision. Hurston shows Janie's most satisfying moment comes after she has experienced the true love of one of the three men, which shows the bee within her blossom. This lets the reader believe in the ultimate power of love and strength within oneself. Works Cited Clarke, Deborah. "'The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking': Voice and Vision in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.'" *African American Review*. 2001. Fontenot, Chester J. , Jr. , Rev. d The Craft of Ralph Ellison, by Robert G. O'Meally. *Black-American Literature Forum* 15. 2 (1981). 79-80. Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana U of Illinois P, 1977. Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Harper: New York, 2006. Racine, Maria J. " Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's

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