

Their eyes were watching god annotated

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



The MLA database returned 168 bibliographic entries containing the subject heading ' Their Eyes Were Watching God. ' In choosing which entries to include in this annotated bibliography, my objective was to represent as many interpretive approaches to the text as possible in order to illustrate the exponential expansion in the scope of Hurston studies in recent years.

Also, because of the condensed time frame of this class, I only reviewed items that are available to UAH students on campus or online, although this criterion excluded several significant critical responses to the novel. Unless otherwise noted, the full texts of all of the articles listed here can be retrieved via EBSCOhost. Ashe, Bertram D. "'Why Don't He Like My Hair? ': Constructing African-American Standards of Beauty in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon And Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. " African American Review 29. (Winter 1995): 579-93. Because of the strong social pressure to conform to predefined notions of conventional (read European) beauty that the dominant culture exerts on all American women, Black women have historically been judged as attractive or unattractive according to the degree to which their facial features, hair, and skin color conform to European norms. In *Their Eyes*, although Hurston describes Janie as having light skin and long hair, Janie does not isolate herself from dark-skinned African Americans.

Janie's hair is linked to her self-esteem and her engagement in the community, and as such, it becomes the battleground of her struggles with Joe Starks. Janie's choice of hairstyle after Starks' death (" one thick braid swinging well below her waist") can be interpreted as a phallic image that metaphorically refers to her newfound power and self-determination. Brogan,

Jacqueline Vaught. " The Hurston/Walker/Vaughn Connection: Feminist Strategies in American Fiction. " *Women's Studies* 28. 2 (1999): 185-201.

In positing an interpretive framework for Elizabeth Vaughn's 1990 novel, *Many Things Have Happened Since He Died*, Brogan discusses the relationship between Walker's *The Color Purple* and Hurston's *Their Eyes*. She notes that both novels have been criticized for failing as realistic fiction, both can be interpreted as romances in the vein of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, and both deal thematically with the 'awakening' of an abused female. Curren, Erik D. " Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God? : Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror. " *African American Review* 29. (Spring 1995): 17-26. Critics have not sufficiently accounted for the complexity of *Their Eyes*, and many analyses have followed Alice Walker's contention that Janie is a depiction of "racialhealth." A less biased reading of the text reveals much tragedy and horror that few critical interpretations have addressed. The novel's title refers to the incipient slave mentality of African Americans, demonstrated by the field hands' reversion to enslaved patterns of behavior in the face of the hurricane. Paralleling the figurative system of Hurston's *Mules and Men*, God is likened to a slavemaster in the *Their Eyes*.

Hurston subverts gothic conventions in the service of affirming the importance of folklore. Davis, Rose Parkman. *Zora Neale Hurston: An Annotated Bibliography and Reference Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1997. This volume presents an excellently balanced and exhaustive compilation of Hurston scholarship through 1996. (Available in UAH Library Reference section; no circulation) Donlon, Jocelyn Hazelwood. " Porches:

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Stories: Power: Spatial and Racial Intersections in Faulkner and Hurston. " Journal of American Culture 19. 4 (Winter 1996): 95-111.

The porch serves as the point of intersection for " spatial, social, and racial" in Southern culture and literature, as exemplified by Hurston's *Their Eyes* and Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*. In *Their Eyes*, porches are equated with the formation of a community voice. Janie's involuntary exile from the front porch of Starks' store reflects her alienation from the community and her ensuing loneliness. Starks' porches also function as a stage on which Janie is displayed. Janie's life experiences ultimately transform porches from " dominating ' places' to authentic community ' spaces. " duCille, Ann. " Stoning the Romance: Passion, Patriarchy, and the Modern Marriage Plot. " *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 110-142. This chapter discusses the treatment of marriage in *Their Eyes* and several other modernist texts by African American women writers. Although many interpretations of the novel agree that *Their Eyes* is largely focused on the issues of love, sex, and marriage, no critical consensus has been achieved as to Hurston's feelings on these topics.

Janie's epiphanic orgasm under the pear tree is likened to the biblical creation story, with Janie's act of kissing " shiftless" Johnny Taylor equated with original sin. Feminist readings of the text that view *Their Eyes* as a woman's quest for and achievement of selfhood are problematic because both Janie and the narrator manifest their continued domination by " patriarchal ideology and romantic mythology" throughout the narrative.

(Available in UAH library) Hattenhauer, Darryl. " Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. " *Explicator* 50. 2 (Winter 1992): 111-3.

Recent criticism of *Their Eyes* fails to consider the notion that Janie may be dying of rabies at the end of the novel, which is bolstered by the foreshadowing of her death that occurs throughout the text. Tea Cake bites Janie before he dies, and she seems not to have sought the treatment that eluded Tea Cake. Further, Janie's shooting of Tea Cake cannot rightfully be termed self-defense in the legal term, since she could have escaped Tea Cake by running away. The imperfect, white-dominated judicial system is partially culpable for failing to recognize this. Haurykiewicz, Julie A. From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. " *Southern Literary Journal* 29. 2 (Spring 1997): 45-61. Hurston employs the recurrent mule theme in *Their Eyes* as a means of commenting " on the disparity between speech and silence in the life of Janie" and her emotional development. The process that occurs in the text is not that of moving from dependence to autonomy, as so many critics have asserted, but rather, ametamorphosis from mule to muliebrity ("the state or condition of being a woman' or possessing full womanly powers").

Significant traits of mules that figure symbolically in *Their Eyes* are mules' mixed parentage and resultant reproductive sterility, mules' historical role as beasts of burden, and the stubbornness and unpredictability that often characterize mules' disposition. Hurston depicts mules as subversive trickster figures in *Mules and Men*, and this association can be extended into *Their Eyes*. The lack of mule imagery in the second half of the book is simultaneous with Janie's burgeoning ability to express herself in the

community. Hubbard, Dolan. ' . . . Ah Said Ah'd Save De Text for You': Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. " *African American Review* 27. 2 (Summer 1993): 167-79. Janie uses techniques of religion-based oral expression to tell her story and valorize extant black culture, a position that was rare among other African American writers in the 1930s. Nanny's statement to Janie about her own unfulfilled desire to preach is the impetus behind Janie's narrative. Pheoby undergoes a ' religious' transformation in the end of the narrative, and she can be interpreted as Janie's disciple. Johnson, Maria. "The World in a Jug and the Stopper in [Her] Hand': *Their Eyes* as Blues Performance. " *African American Review* 32. 3 (Fall 1998): 401-15. The aesthetic principles of blues shape Janie's transformation in *Their Eyes*. Both thematically and structurally, the novel is similar to the songs that African American women like Bessie Smith popularized in the 1920s and 1930s. Blues songs of this era often used bee imagery to connote sexual intimacy and mule imagery to oppression.

All of Janie's love relationships function merely as the vehicle through which she attains selfhood; the men themselves are dispensable. Even Tea Cake can be seen as simply " a stanza in the blues song which Janie ' sings' to Pheoby. " King, Sigrid. " Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. " *Black American Literature Forum* 24. 4 (Winter 1990): 683-97. The relationship between naming and power in African American culture and literature is clearly expressed in *Their Eyes*. Throughout Janie's life, her voice and development of selfhood have been circumscribed by the names that others have imposed upon her.

In the text, naming by others can usually be interpreted as exertion of power and domination. Janie's transition to autonomy is paralleled by her willingness to rename herself and things around her. Unlike the "limiting and destructive" naming that characterized her previous relationships, the positive nature of her union with Tea Cake is expressed by their playful and positive use of language together. After Tea Cake's death, Janie freely renames people and things in her environment, suggesting her freedom from the power-based system of naming that had silenced her.

Kodat, Catherine Gunther. "Biting the Hand that Writes You: Southern African-American Folk Narrative and the Place of Women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. Eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997. 319-42. The fact that Janie kills Tea Cake in *Their Eyes* has not received enough critical attention. Tea Cake's bite can be interpreted as a manifestation of the tension between the quest for proto-feminist autonomy and the Southern black folk tradition Hurston uses as her mode of exposition in the text.

The feminist political agenda has led to widespread resistance to the textual lack of support for characterizing Tea Cake's and Janie's union as ideal. Although Janie does gain an authentic voice at the end of the narrative, the inference that she had to trade her life for it problematizes the received interpretive matrix that figures the text as a successful quest for self. (Available in UAH Library) Lowe, John. "Laughin' Up a World: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the (Wo)Man of Words." *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy*.

Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1994. 156-204. Janie is associated with Janus throughout *Their Eyes*, both by being described as figuratively two-headed, looking backward and forward simultaneously, and being symbolically linked to liminal realms such as doors and thresholds. Through folk-based humor, Janie "magically transforms this communal energy into something constructive and uniting—her story." As in many ethnic literatures, humor plays the role of "expand[ing] language" when ordinary methods of discourse are not sufficient to express the complexities of a situation. Available in UAH library) McGowan, Todd. "Liberation and Domination: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Evolution of Capitalism." *MELUS* 24. 1 (Spring 1999): 109-29. One element that accounts for the recent critical success of *Their Eyes*, which was met with mixed reviews by its contemporary critics, is the nascent poststructuralism of the text, most strongly evidenced in the emphasis on play and the decentering of binary systems of thought and language that parallel Janie's transition to autonomous selfhood.

However, recent poststructuralist readings of the novel have not taken into account the full import of Janie's less-than-ideal relationship with Tea Cake, as well as his death at her hands. These elements of the novel equate liberation with submission, which can be likened to the type of heightened subjectivity that is a hallmark of capitalist society. Ultimately, Janie attains and then quashes her momentary realization that "in order to achieve freedom one must destroy that which refuses loss." Racine, Maria J. *Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *African American Review* 28. 2 (Summer 1994): 283-93. Hurston's use of free

indirect discourse allows her to render fully the internal thought processes of those characters who have not yet achieved an external speaking voice, most notably, Janie. In a narrative that is focused thematically on the achievement of selfhood as emblemized by voice, this is a necessary narrative strategy. Rather than undermining Janie's incipient voice, as Stepto and others have famously contended, Janie's strategic silence at her trial is a manifestation of the fusion of the voices of Janie and the narrator, heretofore distinct. Janie has assimilated the wisdom and insight of the narrator's voice and she can now access it as she chooses. Sheppard, David M. "Living by Comparisons: Janie and her Discontents." *English Language Notes* 30. 2 (December 1992): 63-76. A psychoanalytic reading of *Their Eyes* reveals the 'God' of the book's title to be a manifestation of a classic Freudian father figure.

Hurston's education during the years in which Freudian psychoanalytic theory first became widely disseminated in the academy virtually assures her exposure to its tenets. Killicks, Starks, and Tea Cake are all manifestations of the controlling father figure conflated in the text with God. By opposition, Janie is forced into a suspended childhood that precludes her emotional development. Trombold, John. "The Minstrel Show Goes to the Great War: Zora Neale Hurston's Mass Cultural Other." *MELUS* 24. 1 (Spring 1999): 85-108.

Their Eyes can be read as emphasizing the importance of folk culture and oral tradition to the sustainment of Black culture, almost to the exclusion of all other factors. In later writings, she modifies this view to recenter Black oral tradition as the cultural heritage of the nation as a whole, as evidenced

by her inclusion of white characters in her last published novel. Walker, Alice. " Looking for Zora. " In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 93-116.