

The power struggle in african american marriages

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



“ The Power Struggle in African American Marriages” Zora Neale Hurston is recognized as one of the key contributors to the Harlem Renaissance that occurred during the 1920s and 1930s. Her multitudes of literary works explore and celebrate African American culture and heritage without directly addressing the subject of racism which was prevalent during this time. Hurston incorporates both the positive and negative aspects of African American culture into her stories in order to give a true depiction to her audience.

In a number of her works, including “ Sweat” and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, domestic violence plays a very frequent role in marriages. Husbands would hit their wives to establish their power in the relationship, even when the wives did not do anything to deserve such cruel brutality. In Hurston’s short story, “ Sweat”, oppression of women in the black community is demonstrated through the marriage of Delia and Sykes Jones. In another of her short stories, “ The Gilded Six-Bits”, Hurston writes about a married couple who is completely in love and share a balance of power in the relationship.

In 1937, Hurston published one of her more well-known works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel is about a young African American girl, Janie Crawford, and her journey from a young girl into an independent woman. This transformation is gradually seen through her three marriages. Although each of the marriages was very different from one another, they all shared the same underlying conflict: a power struggle between genders. Due to the death of her mother at an early age, Janie is raised by her grandmother who

grew up as a slave. Nanny, her grandmother, is extremely dissatisfied with the way that black women are treated.

She explains to Janie that the white men oppress the black men who then oppress the black women. It is a brutal cycle that forces black woman to act as the “ mules” by doing all of the hard work(14). In order to protect Janie from this oppression, Nanny forces the sixteen year old girl to marry Logan Killicks. Before the wedding, Janie tries to convince herself she will be happy when she thinks, “ Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. ” (21). Nanny has the opposite view of marriage as Janie; Nanny views marriage as a contract in which the couple does not have to be in love.

Many years older than Janie, Logan is a dull farmer who owns sixty acres of land. After almost a year of being married to Logan, Janie is disheartened by the fact that she still does not love him. As time passes, Logan gradually begins to oppress Janie. At the beginning of the marriage, he would chop the firewood and bring it indoors to Janie. Then, he started expecting Janie to chop the firewood herself and bring it into the house. He not only demands Janie to serve him in the home by preparing his meals and cleaning, but he also expects Janie to serve him in the field by plowing or moving cow manure.

One day when Janie is in the kitchen cooking dinner, Logan yells at her to move some cow manure. Janie refuses his order by saying that she is in her place in the kitchen. Logan verbally exerts his power over his wife as he tells her, “ You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh. ” (31). He

also expresses his power through violence when he threatens Janie by telling her that he will kill her with an ax if she talks back to him again. To Logan, Janie is just an object that he can utilize for labor and chores. He even plans to buy Janie her own mule so that she can plow the fields as well.

The irony of this is that Nanny only wanted Janie to marry Logan so that Janie would not have to be worked like a “mule”. When Logan is gone for the day to pick up the mule, Janie meets a man by the name of Joe Starks (Jody). She is very fascinated by this confident and charming man. When Jody hears that Logan is making her plow the fields, he is appalled. He convinces Janie to run away with him by telling her he will treat her like a wife and take good care of her. Janie makes her first step towards asserting her independence when she leaves Logan to run away with another man.

Although Hurston’s short story “Sweat” exhibits a more extreme case of domestic violence and oppression than in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Delia’s marriage with Sykes is somewhat parallel to Janie’s marriage with Logan. Delia is constantly working as a wash woman in order to provide for her and her husband. Sykes does not contribute anything to the marriage. He has been verbally and physically abusing Delia since their second month of marriage, which was fifteen years ago. The balance of power in their relationship begins to shift when Delia starts to stand up for herself against her husband like Janie did against Logan.

She even scares Sykes off when she threatens to hit him with a frying pan if he comes close to her. Janie and Delia both realize that they deserve to be treated with respect by the men who supposedly love them. Upon running

away together and getting married, Jody and Janie move to an all-black community called Eatonville in which Jody eventually becomes mayor and ends up owning most of the town. Jody is very power hungry and likes to be in control. He even holds multiple positions in the community besides being mayor. Unlike Logan, Jody did not think women should work in the field or perform tough labor.

He referred to Janie as his “ pretty doll-baby” (29). He molded Janie into the perfect submissive “ mayor’s wife”. She always had to be dressed perfectly and she was not allowed to participate in conversations in which she voiced her opinion. He was not only in control of Eatonville but he was also in full control of Janie. He frequently used violence to assert his power over her. For instance, if he did not enjoy a dinner she prepared, he would hit her to punish her. One day, Janie could not take being silent anymore so she jumped into a conversation with Jody and the townspeople.

She made the mistake of expressing her opinion on a matter that they were debating. Outraged and humiliated by his wife’s behavior, Jody hit his wife in front of everyone to remind her of her submissiveness to him. As Jody gained power in the community, Janie continued to lose her identity and whatever was left of her marriage. Whereas Logan treated Janie as an object that he could use in the house and field, Jody treated her as an object that people could admire from afar. When Jody is on his death bed, Janie finally speaks her mind and tells him all of the flaws that he possesses.

She takes all of her anger and resentment that has built up over the past twenty years and lets it out on Jody on his death bed. This event was very

significant in Janie's quest for independence. Once again, Janie has shifted the balance of power from being the one controlled to being the controller. Jody dies very soon after Janie's outburst. For the first time in twenty years, Janie is free again. Although Janie is content with being single and free, an unexpected visitor shows up in her life one day. Tea Cake is about twelve years younger than Janie and he possesses a care-free attitude that Janie loves.

She ends up falling in love with him because of the way he makes her feel; when they are together, starts to find out her true identity. Unlike Logan and Jody, Tea Cake does not instruct Janie to play a certain role or try to silence her voice. He wants to hear her opinions and everything that she has to say. He teaches her to play checkers and other games that she was not allowed to play in her previous marriage to Jody. He even taught her how to shoot a gun. They always had fun together, no matter what they were doing. They move to the Everglades where they are able side by side in the field, bonding with one another every day.

They view their gender roles as equal; he would cook dinner sometime while she worked in the field. One certain person does not hold power over the other one, which is very rare in marriages during this time period in their culture. In fact, when Janie gets jealous of another girl to whom Tea Cake talks, she hits Tea Cake. This is a reversal of the gender roles that Janie encompassed in her previous marriages because she was usually the one being hit by her husband. When Tea Cake gets jealous of his wife and another man, he also hits Janie to remind everyone that she belongs to him.

Even in a well-balanced and healthy marriage, violence is still used as a way to exert power during this time period. During an awful hurricane in the Everglades, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog with rabies. Because he contracts rabies, he becomes very violent and tries to kill the love of his life, Janie. For the first time ever, Janie fully asserts her independence when she kills the only man she has ever loved in order to survive. Janie and Tea Cake's marriage is very similar to Missie May and John Banks' marriage in the beginning of Hurston's short story, "The Gilded Six-Bits".

Missie May and John treat each other equally and never try to oppress one another. John does not use violence to gain power over Missie May like most husbands did during this time. The biggest similarity the two couples have is the playfulness of their relationships. Janie and Tea Cake are always playing games or doing something fun. On that same level, Missie May and John always have a "play-fight" on Saturday to "keep the spark alive". Merriam Webster Dictionary's definition of power is "possession of control, authority, or influence over others".

During the early 1900s in African American culture, there was a large power struggle between males and females. African American males had been oppressed by white men for so long that in turn, they oppressed their African American women in attempt to feel powerful. Unfortunately, most people would not even blink an eye at a man hitting his wife or verbally abusing her in public. As seen in Janie's transformation, a person cannot truly live up to their true potential until they are completely free of anything or anyone that

would confine them. When Janie returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death, she walks through the town with confidence.

She learns not to care what other people think of her because it is not their life; it is her life and she is the one in control of it. Bibliography Hurston, Zora N. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Print. Hurston, Zora N. "Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat"" American Literature Research and Analysis Website. University of South Florida in Fort Myers, July 1996. Web. 13 Oct. 2011. . Hurston, Zora N. "Zora Neale Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits"" American Literature Research and Analysis Website.

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