

The alpha female

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The Alpha Female Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows the Southern black women not as the weak and submissive slaves of their husbands, but rather, *Eyes* traces the development of Janie as the independent black woman. Stepping over her three husbands over the course of her adolescence to middle-age adulthood, she establishes her own role in the community. Fundamental differences between men and women govern her relationship with these men; but regardless, she triumphs over all of them. By taking strength from Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake, Janie, in effect, becomes the alpha male. In her first marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie is too young and inexperienced to realize the complexities of male and female communication. Drawn into the fantasy of the "dust-bearing bee sink[ing] into the sanctum of a bloom", she thinks that marriages are a simple unification of any man with any woman like any bee to any blossom. Directed by her grandmother, Janie marries Logan, a man who although certainly deserves some merit for his self-subsistence farm, definitely lacks the power to be the alpha male. Instead, he attempts to compensate for his lack of physical attractiveness with Janie the most desirable female. However, she sees clearly through his facade and leaves him to his self-delusional world living on his farm at the edge of society. By leaving him, Janie gains a better sense of love; and that to attain it, she must reach it by herself. Joe Starks, better known as Jody, draws his power from those he steps on to reach the top. Although originally, Jody seems like "a bee for her bloom" that would have "flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything", his charm and magic vanishes immediately with their wedding. Her first impressions of him that of the alpha male, sharply dressed

and well educated; however, soon she realizes that his own insecurities cause him to lash out at others. According to Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand*, Jody lives "as an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he [is] either one-up or one-down" from the people of Eatonville. In his struggle to rise to the top, he flaunts Janie as his prized possession and representation of his power. However, Jody becomes overly flamboyant and ostentatious with his gold spitting cup that, according to Gladwell's article *Listening to Khakis*, "a fop" or overly "effeminate". By doing this, he loses his manhood and his rank in the male hierarchical social order. In essence, he becomes the woman, concerned with fashion and overly self-confident. For years, Jody silences Janie and forces her to put her hair up to hide her budding sexuality. Even toward the end of his life when his power over the townsfolk wavers, he tries to hang on to the person over whom he thinks he has overwhelming influence. Like a beaten wolf fighting off other wolves from his idolized mate, Jody tries to keep her out of public reach. Instead, he wants her visible enough to show her off; but far away so that the men like Hicks would "sink back and lose interest at once." The final confrontation between him and Janie eventually destroys him by castrating the leadership that he cherishes. Her attack not only humbles his rank, but also robs "him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" as their undeniable privilege. No matter how low a man's position can be, he would still be a man. In Jody's case, Janie even takes that away from him. By killing him, Janie becomes the alpha male of the town. However, Jody's influence over her still ties her down to the position of a widow and not as an independent woman. Strongly contrasting the two previous husbands, Tea

Cake does not just live in a fantasy world of self-delusion; but he is actually the alpha male. As Gladwell points out, Tea Cake is the nervous “Vons bagboy”, that is not overly confident. Such as when he throws the party for the poor workers on the muck, he worries that they are “no high mucky mucks” for Janie’s sophistication. It is this little degree of self doubt that keeps him a man and different from Jody. Throwing parties, beating Janie, winning poker, are all ways in which Tea Cake asserts himself as the alpha male. He also seems to be outside of society; like in the way he leaves the crowd when everyone watches the baseball game. With this isolation and hard work on the muck, he personifies Tannen’s idea of a man in constant “struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure.” Always independent and avoiding economic failure, Tea Cake leads the life desired by so many other men. It is interesting to note however, that this isolation makes him desire the friendship that so many men, as in the Dockers commercials, also want. He finds the friendship through Janie; and throughout their marriage, it seems as if they have more of a best friend relationship than a husband and wife relationship. During her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie goes through a massive reversal of roles as she becomes the alpha male. First, by association with Jody, the former mayor, the townspeople already respect her and revere her to a certain degree. Also, the other men try to move in on her by “driving considerable distances to ask her welfare” to try to curry her favor. In her control of suitors, she exerts a certain amount of alpha male quality. Second, when Janie courts Tea Cake, the townsfolk do not openly attack her for her age or her association with him. She controls Eatonville and in her new status as alpha female, no one dares approach her. Third,

although unintentionally, Janie kills Tea Cake. In killing the alpha male, she takes his place as the head of the pack. As evident in her opening return to Eatonville, the women of the town may talk badly of her, but none are brave enough to approach Janie face-to-face. Tea Cake finalizes her transition from the curious young girl to the powerful societal debutante with no opposition. Through each of her three husbands, Janie learns an important part of her own development. Also, by killing each husband, she steals what they have or what they represent. In her first marriage, Janie learns that love does not come easy and that she would die if she settles with security. By leaving him, she frees herself from the mediocre life guaranteed by Logan. Eager for love, Janie marries Jody. However, the goals she hoped to accomplish through him died out with the years of suppression. In his death, she earns the title and power that he wielded in a town of leadership rabble. Her last marriage to Tea Cake, is neither for security nor for the false hopes of a happy future. She marries him for the love that she believed had forsaken her. When he dies, she realizes that her happiness does not depend on other people, but rather it is for her to reach.