

Hurston and her novel's critics: racism, the harlem renaissance, and the disputed...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



“ The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy” - Richard Wright.

Although Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*[1] was published during the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, her novel is widely considered to fall within the brackets of its literary movement. However, her work provoked substantial criticism from other black writers and critics of the period; the focus of this criticism was her apparent failure to align her writing with the aims and values of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Perhaps the most censorious of this criticism is that of Richard Wright; in his *New Masses* article “ Between Laughter and Tears”[2], Wright chastises Hurston's work for carrying “ no theme, no message, no thought”[3]. Certainly, comparisons of *Their Eyes* with other key instances of Harlem Renaissance literature that directly confront racism, may initially appear to highlight the novels ‘ ignorance’ to the social and political issues of race that saturated its contextual backdrop. However, removing Hurston's novel from the overshadowing boldness of her contemporaries allows for an unobscured analysis of its content. Although refusing to sacrifice the artistic significance of her novel to render it a mouthpiece for social commentary, her novel does contain substantial subtext on the issue of race relations, together with significant attempts to assert the humanity of the black community.

It is tempting to argue that Hurston's text does indeed retain a distinct separation from the core values of the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, when juxtaposed against much of the African American literature emerging from

the movement, the apparent unwillingness of Hurston to place race issues at the forefront of her work can be seen to put her at odds with her black literary contemporaries. Certainly, the theme of racial injustice pales significantly next to issues of gender and self-discovery; Janie's story is only concerned with race when it needs to be, rather than serving as a conduit through which to make comments of protest. Lynn Domina aligns herself with this view, as she states that " Their Eyes Were Watching God is not a directly political novel like *Native Son*, which Richard Wright would publish just three years later, nor are relationships among black and white characters a central concern of Hurston's novel. It is not a social protest novel"[4]. Here, Domina draws a relevant comparison between the work of Hurston and the work of Wright, who perhaps acted as her harshest critic. Throughout his work, Wright focuses on actively and directly attacking the treatment of the black community; this stands in contrast to Hurston's attempts to transcend it. In *Native Son*, Wright's protagonist, Bigger, is a reactionary character. He is very much a product of the inequality that he has been subjected to and this renders him an ideal conduit through which to conspicuously grapple with the mistreatment of the black community. Ralph Ellison, in a *New Masses* article of his own, supports Wright's insistence that Hurston's novel fails to speak out against the plight of black people. However, he suggests that she not guilty of ' betrayal', but simply of refusing to involve herself in a social or political debate. He describes *Their Eyes* as the story of " a Southern woman's love-life against the background of an all-Negro town into which the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude[5]. Similarly, Alice Walker, in her prelude to the Hurston anthology I

Love Myself When I am Laughing...And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive, comments: I think we are better off if we think of Zora Neale Hurston as an artist, period—rather than as the artist/politician most black writers have been required to be”[6]. Here, Walker aligns herself with the notion that Hurston should be viewed as separate from the Harlem Renaissance movement, without appearing accusatory or critical.

Negative criticism of Hurston's work amongst her black contemporaries is perhaps more aggressively concerned with her endeavour to “ satisfy” the white audience with little regard for furthering the values of the Harlem Renaissance movement. It is particularly notable that Janie is a mixed race protagonist as opposed to a purely black one; she is described as having a “ coffee-and-cream complexion” that is lightened significantly by her white ancestry. Her hair is smooth, straight and much closer in texture to the hair of white people than the hair of black people. By underlining these aesthetical symbols of Janie's ‘ whiteness’, Hurston forges links between the novel's protagonist and her white readers, and ensures that they are not excluded from the potentiality of finding relatability in her writing.. Here, a stark contrast can be drawn against the poetry of Harlem Renaissance writer Sterling Brown; in his poem “ Strong Men”[7], his audience is self-evident. With repeated use of the pronoun “ you”, Brown is directly addressing the black audience, whilst simultaneously attempting to categorize white readers as outsiders through the use of pronouns such as “ them” and “ they”. Notably, only black people have been referred to as an “ audience” here, with white people being referred to simply as “ readers”. Indeed, Brown's

poetry makes no attempt to “satisfy”, or even to relate to, the latter. When juxtaposed against Brown's work, Wright's view that Hurston is writing for the white audience becomes somewhat more convincing. In light of the notion that black and white audiences are entirely separate, and therefore unable to be ‘satisfied’ simultaneously, her refusal to specifically address a black audience implies that she must instead be writing for a white one. On this basis, it can be argued that Hurston delineates a distinct lack of regard for her own community, instead prioritising the furthering of her writing career by gaining recognition amongst the ‘dominant’ race.

In particular, critics have chastised her portrayal of the black figure for intentionally transcribing to the damaging stereotypes long perceived by the white community, in order to make her African American characters more ‘palatable’ for her white readers. Wright goes as far as to suggest parallels between Hurston's portrayal of black characters and the racist theatre practise of minstrelsy: “Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre that is the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh”[8]. Wright argues that Hurston also implements a sense of black subservience reminiscent of slavery via the creation of black characters which exist solely to serve the whites through the provision of entertainment. Throughout the novel, Hurston utilises a phonetic dialogue akin to the black southern vernacular, and it is this stylistic element which has fuelled much of her criticism. Neal A. Lester underlines this use of a dialect which was widely “considered the “street talk” of the illiterate common folk”[9], and comments that “Her presentation

was believed to satisfy white audiences' racist views of blacks as silly, simple, care-free, and unburdened by the complexities of white peoples' lives"[10]. In light of this, Hurston's use of black southern vernacular is directly interlinked with notions regarding her ignorance towards mounting racial tensions. Indeed, the perceived portrayal of the black community as "care-free" and "unburdened" by the confines of white supremacy seems to drastically defer from the Harlem Renaissance values, which encouraged the confrontation of racial injustice and its effects, together with the active rejection of racial oppression. For Wright, Hurston's bid to "satisfy" her white audience expands beyond the comic. Indeed, he berates her use of "highly-charged language"[11] to explicitly depict Janie's sexuality, and suggests that this serves as a means by which to appeal to the sexual tastes of white males. Indeed, Hurston refuses to enforce limitations on the sexual liberation of Janie; this refusal is perhaps most evident as the novel depicts the black female protagonist experiencing her first orgasm: "She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (15). The inclusion of such sexually uncensored acts can be viewed as an extremely provocative move, as African American literature of the early twentieth century largely avoided the representation of black sexuality. James Baldwin once underlined this avoidance as he commented that "In most of the novels written by Negroes until today...there is a great space where sex ought to be"[12]. W. E. B. DuBois supported Baldwin's notion, and attributed this "space" to the attempts of the black community to diminish the perpetuation of those stereotypes which render them as bad, primitive or corrupt: "Our worst side

has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side"[13]. In light of this, Hurston's publication of a novel in which that "great space" was absent can be seen as a betrayal of these attempts; she does not attempt to "deny" those things which may reflect negatively on, or even fetishize, the wider black community.

In addition to 'playing up' to white tastes, it can be argued that Hurston avoids the direct portrayal of the white 'villain', opting instead to create a fictional black community which sabotages its own progression. Indeed, the novel presents a segregation which goes beyond black and white dynamics. The phenomenon of internalized racism is embodied by Mrs Turner, a black woman who discriminates against her own ethnicity and worships 'whiteness'. This can be seen to represent Hurston's betrayal of Harlem Renaissance values. Instead of writing about black people as a deeply wronged community who must raise awareness of their humanity and push back against the whites, she seems to imply that they are, at least to some extent, complicit in their own oppression. Through the character of Coker, Hurston offers an insightful observation on jealousy as a motivator for internalized racism: "Us colored folks is too envious of one 'nother. Dat's how come us don't git no further than us do. Us talks about de white man keepin' us down! Shucks! He don't have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down."(48). Here, Hurston portrays a black man speaking out against the actions of other black men. He suggests that, instead of standing united, the black 'community' sabotage one another's progress in a bid to appease their own sense of inferiority. Here, a comparison of *Their Eyes and Brown's*

"Strong Men" is relevant once more. In Brown's poem, the white community is an external and oppressive force. As he speaks directly to his black audience, he places the "keepin'...down" of black people solely on the shoulders of the whites: "They tried to guarantee happiness to themselves/ By shunting dirt and misery to you"[14]. Simultaneously, he highlights the refusal of the black community to submit to their imposed "misery" as he refers to them as "the strong men gittin' stronger"[15]. With this, Brown rejects any notions of black people propagating their own subjugation; they appear as fighters, who press back against their oppressors. Unlike Brown, who is clear in his assignment of condemnation, Hurston's suggestion that black people may actually be contributors to their situation can be seen to place her once again at odds with the Harlem Renaissance movement.

Furthermore, it can be argued that Hurston's black characters, in addition to serving as 'entertainers', are portrayed as being backwards in their actions, practises and beliefs. The portrayal of traditional African practises of voodoo may be seen to solidify the rendering of damaging black stereotypes. Alain LeRoy Locke, himself an avid supporter of the Harlem Renaissance movement, accused Hurston's novel of perpetuating "the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over and envy"[16]. From this standpoint, Locke aligns himself with Wright's assertion that "she exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race"[17]. Both critics suggest that Hurston presents the black character as a figure whose purpose entirely disregards the values of the racial uplift

programme by instigating a regression from the recognition that black people are capable of intellectualism. B. C McNeill underlined this regression in a review of Hurston's earlier work *Mules and Men*, as he noted that "Certainly the writer, if she has not convinced all readers of the powers of Voodooism, has offered new evidence of widespread ignorance and superstition"[18]. It can also be argued that Hurston's use of " backwards" practises, together with the implementation of southern vernacular, delineates a disregard for the importance of Locke's notion of the ' New Negro'. Indeed, Hurston's representation of the " quaint" but intellectually limited black man seems to impede the emergence of an intellectually and artistically competent class of blacks. Her explicit depictions of black sexuality, together with her refusal to omit the inclusion of black folk culture in its raw state was seen as counterproductive by her aspiring " New Negro" contemporaries, and may be seen to place her novel outside of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement.

However, to condemn Hurston's use of vernacular and traditional African practises as a depiction of the " backwards" black figure is to misread her intentions. Robert E. Hemenway supports this notion as he rejects the view that Hurston intentionally portrays her black characters as embodiments of southern stereotypes: " A more likely interpretation is that she refused to repudiate the folk origins that were such a rich part of her total identity. She abhorred pretence, and she had no desire to adopt a bourgeois respectability"[19]. Indeed, it can be argued that it is her refusal to sacrifice a part of her identity in order to achieve social progression which actually

solidifies her novel's position within the Harlem Renaissance movement. Sharon L. Jones directly disputes Locke's assertion that the use of black vernacular renders the black character as "pseudo-primitive" as she suggests that "One of Hurston's lasting legacies is her ability to show how sophisticated African-American English is. Rather than presenting dialect in a condescending or patronizing manner, she shows its richness and complexity"[20]. Indeed, Hurston frames the black southern voice of Janie with the eloquent English of her own narration. In light of the fact that both Janie and Hurston are African American, this framing technique epitomizes the diversity within the black community; there is no singular 'black dialect', just as there is no singular 'black identity'. Jones goes on to suggest that such use of dialect is actually key in the assertion of black individuality through the medium of literature: "By using black southern dialect, Hurston emphasizes the importance of presenting realistic language in representing American life and culture"[21]. Daphne Lamothe defends the depiction of voodoo in the novel, as she rejects the McNeill's assertion that it "offered new evidence of widespread ignorance and superstition". Instead, she argues that it actually serves as a medium through which to underline the very issues that the Harlem Renaissance aimed to tackle: "Hurston's incorporation into her novel of a religious tradition which she viewed as ancient and African does not preclude the text's relevance to the condition of modern African Americans. The Vodou intertext in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* actually enabled Hurston to grapple with the issues which preoccupied black intellectuals in the 1920's and 1930's, such as class, gender, and inter- and intraracial conflicts"[22]. Indeed, it allows Hurston to explore the changing

nature of African culture, and to underline the emergence of a new, dual identity. In this sense, Hurston epitomizes the idea of the ' New Negro' and his African-American culture.

Although Hurston's tendency to appeal to the white audience is indisputably prevalent throughout; what remains disputable is her intention. Ultimately, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel which acts as a " Trojan Horse" of sorts, as she " satisfies" the whites in order to take action from within. By establishing connections with the white community, even by way of perpetuating black stereotypes, Hurston manages to circulate her message amongst blacks and whites alike. Unlike Brown and Wright, whose direct attacks on the white community serve to alienate them further, Hurston acknowledges that a movement towards equality requires action from both sides. Sandra L. West notes the necessity of this penetration of ' white circles', in particular its academic ones, for the advancement of the Harlem Renaissance movement. According to West, the Harlem Renaissance movement was divided into two phases: the first was concerned with " reveal[ing] the humanity" of black people, while the second phase " Connected Harlem writers to white intelligentsia with its access to established publishing companies"[23]. Indeed, Janie's position as a mixed race protagonist with numerous ' white' traits expands the reach of her novel, allowing for her message to spread throughout both white and black communities.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a passive venture, as Hurston adopts cautious subtlety with which to address issues of race and equality, but she

addresses them nonetheless. To support Ellison's assertion that "the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude" on the setting is to view the novel solely in terms of its surface meaning. Although it is apparent that Hurston avoids the aggressive frankness of certain Harlem Renaissance writers, her work is not without the conveyance of the movements values. Although racism does not appear as a primary issue, it helps to form a contextual backdrop for the novel: it does not drive the plot, it surrounds it. Indeed, the effects of Jim Crow laws and the legacy of slavery repeatedly penetrate both the plot and the setting without ever being allowed to occupy the direct line of focus. W. E. B DuBois's notion of Double-Consciousness or "twoness", a key topic of the Harlem Renaissance, is repeatedly dealt with throughout the novel. According to Dubois: "One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body"[24]. Indeed, as a partially black character who has grown up amongst white people, Janie often embodies these "warring ideals". A key example of this occurs as Janie recounts the moment that she first became aware of her 'blackness' at the age of six. However, she does not refer to it as the moment she realised she was black, but rather as the moment she realised that she "wuzn't white" (13). The implication here is that Janie sees whiteness as the default aesthetic because she is surrounded by white children; she defines herself by her the white community in which she lives, but she herself is not white. The repercussions of this duality for Janie's ability to 'know herself' are profoundly apparent as she recounts her failure to identify her own image in a group photograph: "Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast "where is me? Ah don't see me""

(13). Janie sees herself in two lights: the light of “blackness” which has been allocated to her because of her race, and the light of “whiteness” which has been learned because of the community in which she was raised. Perhaps the most obvious instance of racial tension in *Their Eyes* comes as the bodies of the deceased are cleared away after the hurricane. White bodies are laid to rest in makeshift coffins, while black bodies are simply buried beneath the dirt. The sole justification for this is a shortage of coffins and the ‘practical’ need to prioritise one race over another. This literal and physical division of black and white bodies stands as a symbol for all racial segregation. The enforcement of Jim Crow laws ensured that white people were universally prioritised over black people, with the two occupying separate toilets, entrances, public transport seating and, in the case of Hurston’s novel, burial sites. Loren Lee epitomizes the importance of Hurston’s balance between explicit protest and implicit subtlety as she suggests that “although racial constructs of power permeate the novel, Hurston’s artful rendering of racial conflict is both noticeable enough to be appreciated and subtle enough to allow Janie’s existence to not be defined solely by her race”[25]. Indeed, Hurston takes great care not to widen the division between white and black, endeavouring instead to offer evidence of similarity.

Essentially, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel which promotes racial equality through the realization that the separation between ‘black’ and ‘white’ is both unnecessary and irrational. Hurston seems to draw on the work of anthropologist Franz Boas of whom she was a student. Specifically, she adheres to his suggestion that race holds no biological or inherent basis

for division and that racial inequality is a manufactured construct; Boas argued that “ The behaviour of an individual is determined not by his racial affiliation, but by the character of his ancestry and his cultural environment”[26]. Indeed, as previously mentioned, Janie is unable to identify herself based on aesthetics and, to her child-self, aesthetic differences account for the entirety of racial separation. The implication here is clear: racial differences beyond appearance are a product of environment and experience. When read in light of this notion, the division of black and white corpses following the hurricane takes on a new significance. The hurricane does not discriminate between black and white: regardless of skin colour, both races are united by the universality of death. However, once the bodies are reclaimed by the society of the living, they are divided once more. Even in death, the prevalence of racial difference arises from societal constructs as opposed to inherent contrasts. Hurston's utilization of a protagonist of both white and black descent allows her to portray the union of two ‘ separate’ races within one individual; the individual in question is neither black nor white, but simply human. Any alienating effects of this commixture, such as the interplay of Janie's “ twoness” are shown to be societal as opposed to genetic. Loren Lee highlights the importance of the inclusion of Janie's white characteristics alongside her black ones as she notes that “ Janie straddles the physical and social lines of race through her fluid racial identity and establishes herself as an individual instead of a type”[27]. Indeed, it this ‘ fluidity’ which allows Janie to act as a bridge, illustrating a harmonious coexistence of both black and white traits within “

one dark body"[28]; this harmony works to bridge the perceived gap between races.

By comparison, Sterling Brown's aforementioned poem "Strong Men"[29] is a Harlem Renaissance work which asserts black "humanity" in such a way as to deepen the chasm between black and white. By addressing the black audience as "you" and the white readers as "them", he perpetuates the very notion that Hurston attempts to diffuse: the unlikeness between the two races. An even more poignant example of this can be observed in Claude McKay's early Harlem Renaissance poem "If We Must Die"[30] as he declares: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack"[31]. Here, McKay goes further than to strive for equality, suggesting instead an impending reversal of power. In referring to the whites as a "pack" and the blacks as "men", he creates connotations of the dehumanizing effects of slavery and Jim Crow laws on the black community. However, in McKay's poem, it is the whites who are reduced to animals while the blacks stand their ground and take back their humanity. Furthermore, the poem acts a sort of 'call-to-arms' for the black community to rise up against their white oppressors, inciting ideas of violence and conflict. Indeed, the narrator calls for the blacks to "defy"[32] the whites, and "for their thousand blows deal one death blow!"[33]. The encouragement of conflict between two races stands in stark contrast to the ideas implied in Hurston's novel; Whilst McKay aims to eliminate the rift by eliminating the white 'opposition', Hurston aims to heal the rift through the realization that black people have all the humanity of white people. In this sense, her novel is no less valuable to the

Harlem Renaissance movement than the work of McKay. She simply focusses on different, but still appropriate, values. As opposed to issues of race, it is issues of gender that occupy the very heart of Hurston's novel. These issues act as a unifying force between women of both black and white communities. Joe demonstrates that the place of the early twentieth century black female is aligned with that of the white female as he states that " mah wife don't know nothin' ' bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." (53). Indeed, by emphasizing the universality of female oppression across races, Hurston draws further parallels and suggests that women of both colours ought to unite against patriarchal oppression. Harold Bloom supports this notion as he argues that " Hurston's Janie is now necessarily a paradigm for women, of whatever race, heroically attempting to assert their own individuality in contexts that continue to resent and fear any consciousness that is not male"[34].

In contrast to the notion that Hurston's refusal to directly confront racial issues entirely diminishes the significance of *Their Eyes* within the Harlem Renaissance, her reluctance to saturate her novel with the " casual brutality" of Jim Crow law or the reverberations of slavery offers far more aid to the advancement of the African American community than the forthright literary protests of Wright or Brown. Hurston's novel distinguishes her from what she once referred to as the " sobbing school of negrohood"[35] that she viewed as dominating much of the Harlem Renaissance movement. The ' black character' as rendered by Hurston is not a downtrodden victim or a product

of racial abuse, but an individual with all the potential, passions and capabilities of the white character. By refusing to perpetuate the division between races, Hurston, in all of her subtlety, offers a far more powerful statement of protest. Hemenway suggests that issues of racial equality are allocated little attention in the novel so that the artistic capabilities of the African American culture can be brought to the forefront instead. He states that "Their Eyes Were Watching God celebrates the art of the community in such a manner that the harsh edges of life in a Jim Crow South seldom come into view"[36]. Indeed, Hurston does not minimise the conveyance of racism in a bid to avoid issues of politics, but in a bid to allow for the unobscured promotion of the idea that the ' negro' has a culture which expands far beyond the forced confines of victimhood. By offering the black community some degree of separation from their situational drawbacks, she restores the individuality and humanity of each member far more effectively than those Harlem Renaissance writers who ardently portray their mistreatment.

Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston does indeed subscribe to some of the literary actions of which her critics accuse her; her efforts to tailor her work to the tastes of white audiences and her refusal to directly grapple with racism are particularly evident. However, much of the criticism she was subjected to for her perceived ' betrayal' of the Harlem Renaissance movement is based on a misreading of the purpose behind these actions. Indeed, amidst the publication of such aggressively outspoken " New Negro" works as Brown's " Strong Men", Wright's *Native Son* and McKay's " If We Must Die", the subtle anti-racist subtext in Hurston's novel could be

reasonably overlooked. Although her goal is aligned with these writers - specifically, the attainment of complete racial equality - her means differ significantly. The novel is concerned with closing the divide between two races through the realization that their inherent differences are only skin deep. In this sense, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does not 'betray' the values of the Harlem Renaissance so much as it builds upon them and approaches them in an alternative manner; Hurston attempts to bridge the gap between the white and black communities and pursue equality through racial unity. Primarily though, it is Hurston's creation of art for art's sake that truly epitomizes the Harlem Renaissance; By removing all literary constraints including sexual censors and political expectations, and illustrating an uninhibited rendering of African American culture in all of its richness, complexity and diversity, Zora Neale Hurston effectively stands as the definition of the literary 'New Negro'.

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