

"hope, hopelessness and despair": an analysis of realism, naturalism and romantic...

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



The 1930s: a pivotal point in the birth of literary modernism. After Sigmund Freud's publication of studies of human emotion through psychoanalysis in the early 1900s, writing was forever changed. Authors added masks of character development which strayed from classic archetypes and relied on individuality. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a product of its time, as is showcased in its unique literary structure.

Throughout this work of the modernist moment, Hurston cleverly blends realism, naturalism, and romanticism to create a new genre of writing accurately representative of sociological pressures, natural destruction, and passion for individual freedom.

Hurston's novel incorporates elements of realism and naturalism through ironic discrimination from the Turners, grounded dialect choices, and Darwinian views of nature's relation to humanity. To fully embody literary realism, the depictions of racial discrimination and dialect expectations reflect the prominent sociological pressures at the time of Hurston's writing.

Contrary to natural expectation, Mrs. Turner is dark-skinned yet incredibly racist towards African Americans. She is "a milky sort of a woman" (163) and believes that her lighter skin gives her invaluable status above those darker than her. She complains, "Ah got white folks' features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain't fair" (166).

Hurston's inclusion of this mentality in her novel is, indeed, accurately reflective of a time when the black community was trying to define itself. The conflict of definition is most clearly demonstrated through the style of writing: the story's narrative is told in sophisticated, grammatically accurate, developed English while the dialogue is spelled phonetically, based on

exactly how it is spoken. While critics like Richard Wright saw this tactic as demeaning, Hurston in no way presents the spectacle of a white author crafting comedy through dialect, as shown with Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Instead, the writing style aims to accurately represent the reality of the community as well as the potential of the community.

Just as importantly, Hurston's writing not only follows the realistic mentality, but also the naturalist opinion of portraying animalistic tendencies and natural disasters as destructive forces, without regard to humanity. Before the arrival of the destructive hurricane, Hurston writes that "Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite... Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde" (181). In this Darwinian competition of survival-of-the-fittest in the midst of relentless nature, animal instincts defeat human instincts. To attempt rationalization by planning and preparing against an uncontrollable storm is useless, because anyone can be a victim. Hurston describes the effects of the storm: "Winters and winters of hardship and suffering. The wheel kept turning round and round. Hope, hopelessness and despair" (195). Much like the violent seas in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," natural forces have no concern for humans and their circumstances.

To create a juxtaposition to the aforementioned realistic and naturalistic qualities, Hurston blends romanticism into her writing by conveying the plot through progressions of husbands, of locations, and ultimately of Janie

finding her voice. As Janie travels through marriages with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Woods (Tea Cake), Hurston exhibits a romantic timeline in which each husband brings more freedom and more happiness. In her first marriage, Janie lacked all independence, was made to work in the field, and felt absolutely no attraction towards her unromantic husband, Logan Killicks, saying " Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whilst he is in dere. He don't even never mention nothin' pretty" (28). The dissatisfaction leads Janie to run away with Joe, who seemed more adventurous at surface level, yet only cared about ambition, construction, and productivity. He forced Janie to work in the store, a routine which " kept her with a sick headache" (64). When Joe dies and Tea Cake enters Janie's life in the romantic image of a stranger oddly tuning an imaginary guitar, Janie immediately falls in love with Tea Cake's spontaneity and respect for her freedom. This sequence toward a less controlling and more passionate marriage is of the romantic style, and only underscores the multifaceted nature of Hurston's work.

Directly correlated on the narrative's timeline with the sequence of husbands, a sequence of locations attaches romantic themes of hope and escape to each new setting. The plot begins in a small country town in Janie's childhood and travels through Eatonville, the Everglades, Palm Beach, and eventually Eatonville again. This usage of romanticism contradicts itself in Janie's final return to Eatonville, yet can be explained and redeemed by the heroine's possession of seeds with which she will plant her own ideas of hope in Eatonville itself. This place was the least satisfactory of her homes; it

was contrived and developed by Joe Starks, a black man who in some respects wanted nothing more than to be "white." Thus, at the end of the book, Janie "had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant. ...Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance" (225). Janie is taking all of the freedom and happiness she gained after escaping Eatonville, returning, and planting her seed of passion and independence in order to grow a new culture on top of the broken one. The book's romantic style concludes with a moment of stark, traditionally romantic symbolism.

Given these points, it is irrefutable that Zora Neale Hurston crafted a new literary style. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* draws upon three diverse literary mentalities (realism, naturalism, and romanticism) and instead of choosing one, fuses these styles to create a medium to voice a range of concerns: proper responses to inappropriate societal expectation, environmental disaster, and the undying drive for the individual's independence. As Sigmund Freud said, "Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise." Hurston brings hope and optimism to a reality that is honest, and accurately reflects the surrounding society of her narrative world.