

One woman's search  
for her self-identity. a  
review of their eyes  
were watching go...

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



Their Eyes Were Watching God is a 1937 classic fiction novel that was written by African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston (Jan. 7, 1891 – Jan. 28, 1960). Hurston was born to John Hurston and Lucy Ann Hurston and was the fifth in a family of eight children. Her mother passed on in 1904 and her father re-married. She was later sent to a boarding school, but dropped out due to non-payment of school fees by her father and stepmother.

She was later employed as a maid in a theatrical band that toured America (Gale CEngage Learning, 2011). She returned to school and graduated from Morgan Academy in 1918. Soon after her high school graduation, Hurston entered Howard University where she went on to co-found the University's student newspaper, The Hilltop. She left the University in 1924 and was awarded a scholarship at Barnard University; she obtained her BA in anthropology in 1927 and worked at Columbia University for two years (Gale CEngage Learning, 2011)

By 1930, Hurston had written many short stories, including the much-hyped Mules and Men (1935), a landmark piece of writing that expounded on the African-American tradition. She also collaborated with several well-known African American writers such as Langston Hughes. Most of her novels were published in the 1930s and included Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939).

Hurston spent the latter parts of her career writing for magazines and newspapers, before she disappeared from the public eye, and died in 1960 from a hypertensive heart disease (Lester, 1999). Of all her literary and

factual works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is her best-known work (Gale Cengage Learning, 2011).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written in 1937 during which books on racial difference stirred heated public debates. The success of the book is attributed to the financial crisis of the 1930s that brought an end to the cultural openness that had enabled the Harlem Renaissance to thrive.

As the financial crisis worsened, political unease heightened too and writers felt that art should be used as a political tool to reveal social injustices in the world, and dismissed many ideas of the Harlem Renaissance as discriminative, lacked significant political content, and therefore did not deserve any artistic merit. However, this did not prevent the book from generating attention and heated debates, especially for its use of phonetic spellings of the dialect spoken by African Americans.

Janie Crawford, a beautiful, confident woman in her mid 30s returns to Eatonville, Florida, after a long time. The local black community gossip about her and wonder the whereabouts of her young husband, Tea Cake. They read her self-belief to imply loneliness and do not associate with her, but Janie's friend, Pheoby Watson, stays close. After much pressing, Janie decides to tell her story to Watson (Hurston, 1937). She explains that her mother, Leafy, ran away and was raised by her grandmother, Nanny.

Nanny transfers all the hopes she had had on Leafy to nanny and when she sees her granddaughter kissing a local boy, she arranges her marriage to Logan Killicks, a much older man. Even though Janie objected to the

marriage, Nanny wanted to have all the things she could not have, and it was only through this marriage that she could achieve this (Hurston, 1937). The marriage turns out to be a disaster and Janie runs off with the persuasive Jody Starks, they move to Eatonville.

Upon arriving at Eatonville, Starks observes that the locals do not have any ambition, so he organizes and purchases more land from them and constructs a store, and is later chosen as the mayor. Janie becomes conscious that Starks only wants her as a trophy wife to complement his high-profile position.

Starks passes away and Janie is overwhelmed by the number of admirers, however, she falls in love with a man who named Tea Cake (Hurston, 1937). They sell the store and head to Jacksonville where they get married, and later move to the Everglades where Tea Cake finds work in a farm. Even though their marriage has highs and lows, Janie is happy for she was in a marriage bound by love, like she had always wanted.

The area is hit by a storm and in the confusion, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog and contracts rabies. Due to his mental instability, Tea Cake attempts to shoot Janie, but she shoots him first, in defense. The court charges her with murder, but is later acquitted, and returns to Eatonville (Hurston, 1937).

Their Eyes Were Watching God presents many instances of a woman, Janie Mae Crawford, who is in search of herself. Even though the novel focuses of Janie's relationships with other men, it is primarily a search for her inner true

self, her own identity. She goes through this mission by first finding her voice, then herself.

Throughout the novel, Janie strives to find her own voice and even though it takes her more than thirty years to do it, she finally succeeds in her mission. Every one of her husbands plays a significant role in her pursuit to finding her own identity. During our first and last encounters with Janie, she is all alone. This view is supported by critics who note that the book is not about her pursuit for love, but rather that of independence.

Janie goes back to Eatonville a confident and strong woman, a large contrast from the moment we first met her, when she was uncertain of who she was or the kind of life she wanted to lead. For example, in her first marriage, she is confused as to whether she is really into the marriage to get love or for the material gains. Her confusion is slightly quelled by Nanny, who assures her that the marriage will enable her to have all that she never had a chance to have, and she will have security, especially Logan owned a 60-acre potato farm.

Her confusion is further evident when Nanny dies a few weeks after her marriage to Logan Killicks, and with no one to guide her, she runs away with another man. Indeed, while still married to Logan, she opts to listen to "the words of the trees and the wind" (Hurston, 1937). Through this marriage, she finds part of herself, however, she still needs a relationship that is bound by love.

As she narrates her story to Phoeby, she commences with her revelation under the flowering pear tree, the revelation that kicks off the pursuit in search for her true inner self. It is under this tree that she encounters an ideal unification of harmony and nature. She recognizes the love that she would like to have, a reciprocity that brings unity in the world, but is not sure of how to go about it. At this juncture, she is not even sure of what she wants.

Jodie's entry into her life offers a reprieve from the dull and no-nonsense Killicks. With his smooth talk, Jodie convinces Janie that he will help her achieve her dreams. However, Janie realizes that Jodie's application of authority only stifles her. When Janie visits the ailing Jodie, her stifled power breaks through in an outburst of verbal reprisal.

Her rather cruel outburst at the dying Jodie portrays the profoundness of Jodie's inner self (Kubitschek, 1983). Her encounter with Killicks and Jodie does not kill her will in her journey to find her own identity, in contrast, these experiences strengthen her as seen when she meets Tea Cake (Indiana State University, 1982, Waters, 1978).

Janie blossoms in her relationship with Tea Cake as he "teaches her the maiden language all over" (Hurstons, 1937). She is able to control her speech and remain quiet whenever she decides to.

The notion of silence as strength rather than submissiveness becomes evident during her trial. Dialogue had played a critical role up to this moment, and one might have expected the author to use the court

proceedings to highlight Janie's mature voice. The lack of dialogue in this section reveals Hurston's unease with rhetoric for its own benefit: Hurston does not want the Janie's voice to be mistaken for that of a lawyer or politician.

Janie's maturity of voice is a direct indicator of her inner growth, and the activities at the courtroom may be plotted too much as to draw the parallels in her inner self. Part of Janie's maturity lies in her ability to recognize that other people's meanness and brutality toward her or their failure to understand her originates not from hatred but from their background or limited viewpoint.

Janie Crawford, who is the main protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, presents many interesting similarities with the book's author, Zora Neale Hurston. This similarity stems from the fact that most of Hurston's works are a reflection of her own self and her experiences. Similar to Janie, Hurston was married to more than one husband, and died single.

Hurston had two marriages in her life, the first was in 1927 to Herbert Sheen, the couple divorced four years later, Hurston then married Albert Prince III in 1939 and divorced in 1943. Even though little is known about these marriages, reading about Janie's search for her inner self can give a hint as to why both marriages lasted only a few years. Even though Prince Albert III was 23 years her senior, the pair married, although they did not stay together for long (Gale Cengage Learning, 2011).

Hurston uses Janie to illustrate how women overcame injustices arising from race, gender roles, and oppression. As a young person herself, Hurston faced

numerous challenges herself in her quest to have decent education, including dropping out of school to work as a maid after her biological mother died.

It was only through hard work and determination that she was able to return to school and later get a scholarship to study at Barnard University. She was the only black student at the time. The story is more or less the same with Janie who, after her mother ran away, was raised by her grandmother and overcame numerous challenges in her quest to achieve personal satisfaction and have a decent life.

Racial overtones arise from the fact that Janie was light-skinned and this endeared her to men as opposed to women with darker skin, such as Mrs. Turner. Her skin tone exposed the male preference for light-skinned women. Jordan (1988) and Upshur-Ransome (2000) share the view and mention that Hurston's early life and experiences heavily influenced her works.

The novel is mainly set in the black neighborhood of central and southern Florida, where life is hard, the African American population is suffering from the combined effects of the Great Depression, and the low socio-economic status associated with non-whites.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is very progressive in nature as it illustrates the representation, isolation, and prejudice towards the African American population. Hurston provides a detailed description of the scenes in the novel as it gives a depiction of economic and social situation in real-life black neighborhoods at the time (Bloom, 2008, Bowers 2006).



Their Eyes Were Watching God presents the ordeals on one woman as she attempts to find her own identity. Janie is married three times, the first two marriages fail to live up to her expectations regarding the concept of the reciprocity of love and freedom. As she moves from one marriage to another, her maturity increases and discovers more of herself.

From Logan, she learns of the importance of love and compassion in a marriage, from Jody she learns, among other things, the importance of self-expression and from Tea Cake Janie discovers her ability to express herself through verbal communication, and learns that silence too can be a source of strength.

Equally, she is silent in noticeable places, neither revealing why she is not offended with Tea Cake's beating, nor revealing her words at the courtroom. The author puts immense significance on the use of language as a source of identity and strength.

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