

The multiple meanings of "their" in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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



In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, Hurston leaves part of the title ambiguous and therefore open to interpretation. Throughout the novel, the characters mention or allude to God, or a "god." The multiple meanings of the word "God" allow the word "their" to have multiple meanings. This pronoun in the title refers to both the people of Eatonville and African-Americans due to their looking up to Joe Starks and God, respectively, who are both higher authorities.

In the novel, the people of Eatonville are watching Joe because of his godlike nature. The townspeople are shown to be watching Joe when he publicly snubs Janie after she is asked to make a speech. The townspeople recognize Joe's godlike persona, which he has exhibited through his development of Eatonville, and for this reason they fear him. Their reluctance to criticize Joe for not letting his wife speak, though they would like to hear her, shows the power he has amassed. Additionally, no one objects to Joe's humiliation of Janie because they are all too busy watching Joe and what he has to say. Therefore, when he says Janie should not speak, they simply accept his statement and continue listening to their "god." This also shows how moldable the minds of the townspeople are. By simply being a leader, Joe is able to take power and make himself their focus, though Joe has not done a lot to help the town yet. Because Joe is the only character to show any leadership qualities, he quickly wins their support, submission, and attention. Joe's power and the townspeople watching him are also shown at the assembly to install the streetlight. Joe's obsession with power leads him to buy a streetlight for the town and have a ceremony for it. By doing so, Joe is gaining the heart of the town, and as a result, power. While the town may

see the streetlight as a benevolent gift, in reality it is only a tool in his ascension to the " throne" of the town. Joe's true agenda is shown by how he chooses to go about giving his gift to the people. Instead of simply taking it out of its box and placing it on a post, Joe chooses to first display the lamp for everyone to see, and then have an elaborate celebration in order to show the people all he has done for them. Joe's desire to be the town's god is also shown when he says how the " sun-maker," God, brings the sun up in the morning and brings it down at night. Joe acts this way in order to make it clear to the town that he is their almighty leader, and actually possesses the godlike ability to control light and dark. By buying the light, Joe is giving the " sun" to the town, and thus acting like God. Because of this celebration and what the community thinks of as a kind gift, Joe is able to attract the entire community's attention and make it want to watch him speak at the ceremony and watch his actions in general. Joe's ability to lead allows him to gain ultimate power and thus gain the undivided attention and allegiance of the people of Eatonville.

The title of the novel can also be a reference to the African-Americans of the Everglades, especially Janie and Tea Cake, when they are forced to watch God after being left with no other options. When " Ole Massa is doin' His work now" as the storm comes through the Everglades, Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat begin to question God, since the time has passed for asking the white folks what to do. This represents the African-American community as a whole relying on the advice of the white people. Only after they can no longer ask for help from white people do they begin to question God, proving

that they have lost faith in God. The irony of their actions is shown by the fact that God is referred to as "Ole Massa," a name that could be used for a white slave owner. It is as if God, in the form of a white slave owner, is causing the storm. Though the African-Americans are aware that the white people were, and to some degree still are, their oppressors, they still value the opinions of those white people, who do not necessarily like them, over the opinions of their God, who does not discriminate. After Janie and Tea Cake are left with no other options, they finally begin to question God. However, this soon turns to watching God, not just questioning him. They finally begin to watch God, and gain faith in him, waiting to see what he will bring them, but only after all other options have been exhausted. In the novel, Janie, Tea Cake, and Motorboat watching God after all else fails represents the African-Americans as a whole regaining their faith in God during a time of need.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston leaves parts of the title ambiguous to leave it open to interpretation. The title can mean both that the people of Eatonville are watching Joe due to his godlike characteristics and that the African-Americans are watching God due to their need for help. In both cases, an almighty figure is asserting himself over others in order to gain the attention of people and make the people "watch" him.