

Folklore in their eyes were watching god

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



Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks while she was in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, researching the country's major voodoo gods and studying as an initiate under the tutelage of Haiti's most well-known Voodoo houngans (priests) and mambos (priestesses). However, while many scholars have explored Hurston's interest in and study of voodoo in her ethnographical texts, such as *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), only a few have explored the relationship between voodoo and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Close analysis of the novel reveals that voodoo imagery and symbolism is integral to the development of the predominant themes of Hurston's second novel.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston explores the natures of black women and black men; the ways in which their natures are shaped by their individual and collective experiences within American and African American cultures; and how their experiences inform their self-knowledge, their connection with the world around them and their relationships with others. More specifically, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is concerned with a young black woman's quest for self-discovery beyond the false values imposed on her by a society that allows neither women nor black people to exist naturally and freely. Through her female protagonist, Janie Crawford, Hurston critiques the status of black women and the roles available to them within American and African American cultures; and she offers them an alternate frame of reference for their unique experiences within the world and an alternate path to self-determination and autonomy. That path is Voodoo, a religion which Hurston describes as "the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms . . . a religion of creation and life" (*Tell My Horse* 376).

Voodoo is a syncretization of African and European religious beliefs and practices, through which its devotees strive for personal and communal power by achieving harmony with their respective individual natures and with the world in which they live. According to scholar of voodoo, Alfred Métraux, the religion has “ no national church, no association of priesthood, no written dogma, no code, no missionization” (Métraux 13). Consequently, it is a religion that can be and has been adapted—through the integration of new symbolic materials—to address the changing social and political circumstances of the cultures that practice it. It is the adaptability of the religion and the religion’s historical and social relevance to the unique experiences of black people (especially women) upon which Hurston draws in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Employing voodoo as an intertext for her novel, Hurston has at hand a system of beliefs and practices replete with powerful female deities, female leaders and female adherents. As a religion which reflects the desires and aspirations of its followers, which functions as an alternate form of power for those that might otherwise feel powerless, and which privileges women’s lives in ways other religious traditions do not, Voodoo is an effective vehicle through which to explore the role and status of black women within modern African American culture. Through the integration of voodoo imagery and symbolism, Hurston provides an alternate path by which women can transform and transcend the socio-cultural pathologies and existential constraints that distinguish the African American female experience.

Despite the apparent absence of a unified social or ideological superstructure, Voodoo has a body of basic beliefs and practices that characterize the religion throughout the world (Métraux 13). Central to the religion is the existence of loa or mystères, spirits or deities that personify the experiences, hopes, and aspirations of their devotees or followers and upon whom followers call for the remedy of ills, the satisfaction of needs, and for hope and survival. When summoned in a voodoo ceremony, the loa ‘mounts’—as a rider mounts a horse—or ‘possesses’ his or her servant and then speaks and acts through his or her ‘horse,’ addressing the specific circumstances for which s/he has been summoned.

There are two classes of voodoo loa: the rada and the petro. The rada loa are considered “high and pure” (Tell My Horse 441). They are gentle gods who do only good things for people. They may exercise violence to punish a Vodouisant, but never—like certain petro—out of sheer spite. Petro loa are more implacable and violent than their rada alter ego. There is a category of petro loa known as gé-rouge or “red-eyes” that are, without exception, evil and even cannibal. While the petro loa are known as evil, they can also be made to do good things. However, the petro work for an individual only is s/he makes a promise of service. When someone swears her- or himself to the petro, s/he must pay for the debt; or the petro will exact revenge.

Central to Hurston’s narrative is her female protagonist, Janie Crawford-Killicks-Starks-Woods, as the embodiment of Erzulie (or Ezili), the loa that governs the feminine spheres of life. The figuration of Erzulie entered the religion during a time when slave owners sexually exploited their female

slaves and separated families at will (“Erzulie” A-muse-ing Grace). In her rada and petro manifestations (Erzulie Freda, Erzulie Danto and Erzulie Gé-Rouge), she represents the ideality of love, the sanctity of motherhood, women’s innate strength and creativity, their ability to endure and survive adverse circumstances and their determination to fight for what is most dear to them. Through her characterization of Janie-Erzulie, Hurston explores a more complex subjectivity for African American women beyond that of sexually-exploited slave and tragic mulatta (two of the earliest female character types to appear in African American literature); and she inscribes a new archetype into the pantheon of African American female selves: a heroic African American ‘Everywoman’ who masters her world and claims her place within it as a fully-integrated, autonomous and creative self.

Through her seamless integration of voodoo, Hurston challenges and subverts the predominant stereotypes of voodoo as ‘primitive magic’ and ‘witchcraft,’ legitimating what she fervently believed to be an authentic, African spiritual path and establishing its viability as a medium of empowerment for those without power. She also challenges and subverts the predominant myths and stereotypes that perpetuate the condition and treatment of women, in general, and black women, in particular, within American culture; and she re-elaborates existing archetypal patterns of the African American female socio-cultural experience, loosening the constraints under which black women exist.

The result is a narrative of ‘mythic’ status and import. Just as myths transcend the limitations of common life and imbue daily actions with

universal (i. e., archetypal) significance, Hurston uses voodoo imagery and symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to create a modern American myth—grounded in the African diasporic tradition—that transcends what is expected and accepted as historically and culturally plausible for black women within the prevailing social order. She valorizes a tradition through which black women can achieve selfhood that integrates both their public and private selves and that reflects agency and authority over their own lives and their own stories.

Hurston relies on the stages of the archetypal quest paradigm, which comprise the foundation for the monomyth of the hero's journey, to structure her novel. Each culture has its version of the monomyth. However, in all cultures, the quest is traditionally cyclical and can be divided into three major stages, as follows: (1.) Separation (Call to Adventure); (2.) Initiation (the Journey); and (3.) The Return ("Ageless Wisdom," Divine). Each section of Hurston's novel represents a different stage of Janie's quest toward selfhood. However, Hurston uses imagery and symbolism from both voodoo and black American folklore to adapt and transform the conventions of the paradigm and to situate the text within a tradition that is identifiably African American and female. Also, the novel is a frame narrative. Janie's story of her journey to selfhood, recounted in her own voice, is framed and aided by that of a third-person omniscient narrator, who possesses the folk wisdom and knowledge of the black experience for which Janie is questing and can, therefore, represent the minds and speech of all of the characters from a timeless perspective that Janie's direct discourse alone cannot. The distinctive blending of spiritual and folk imagery and symbolism, coupled

with Hurston's use of both direct discourse and an omniscient point-of-view which functions to "present past and fictional present as if each is present time" (Pondrom 201) contributes to the mythic status of Janie's story.

As the novel begins, Janie's quest is completed, and she returns to Eatonville, the place from which she embarked on her journey, to narrate to her friend, Pheoby Watson, the manner in which her identity has been revealed to her. Hurston establishes an immediate connection between African-Haitian and African-American southern cultures in her description of the residents of Eatonville:

It was time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. (1)

The description of the townspeople as "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences" recalls Hurston's description of zombies in *Tell My Horse*. Zombies, according to Hurston, are individuals who have died and whose bodies have been, following their burial, taken from the grave and given an "antidote" that "resurrects" them. The antidote restores the body's vital signs, allowing the body to move and act, but leaves the victim with no memory, no willpower, unable to speak or hear, and with "dead eyes" that stare without recognition (*Tell My Horse* 469). In this state, zombies can be easily used as field laborers, as 'beasts of burden.' In her description of the townspeople, Hurston links the experiences of African diasporic people and

alludes to the dehumanizing effects of slavery as the possible genesis of the figuration of zombies in the Voodoo religion. She alludes, as well, to the perpetuation of this aspect of slavery in the lives of poor southern African Americans beyond the Reconstruction era. Also, in her description, Hurston points to the restorative capabilities of the community. Once they are removed from the authority of “ the bossman” and are safely ensconced within their own community, the townspeople reclaim their strength and humanity; and it is the community’s potential for individual and collective self-possession and self-expression with which Hurston is ultimately concerned.

However, Hurston makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that while communal self-determination plays a significant role in the novel, it is “ the woman”—as Janie is referred to for the first three pages of the novel, reinforcing her archetypal persona—who is the central focus of the narrative. Janie returns to Eatonville wearing overalls, with her long hair swinging in a braid down her back; and the townspeople sit in appreciation or judgment, according to gender, upon her return:

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength. (2)

Janie is the essence of Erzulie Freda in physical appearance, carriage and demeanor. Erzulie Freda is the rada loa of love, beauty and elegance; she is the potential lover of all of the men of Haiti and the rival of all of the women. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston describes her as a mulatta—as is Janie; she is the product of her mother's rape by her white schoolteacher—with long dark hair, “ a beautiful woman of lush appearance [with] firm, full breasts and other perfect female attributes” (384). In fact, Hurston's description of Janie closely resembles Alfred Métraux ' s description of Erzulie Freda in *Voodoo in Haiti*: “ At last, in the full glory of her seductiveness, with hair unbound to make her look like a long haired half-caste, Ezili makes her entrance . . . She walks slowly, swinging her hips” (111).

Like Erzulie Freda, Janie stirs the lust of the men and evokes the envy of the women. However, while she physically resembles Erzulie Freda, Janie's overalls recall the petro aspect of the loa, Erzulie Danto. While Erzulie Freda is “ a city girl of refined tastes and desires,” Erzulie Danto is a hard-working, industrious country woman who can become overbearing, aggressive and acerbic in her aspect and who is frequently envisioned wearing the blue denim of a Haitian peasant woman (Filan 1). In integrating the two figurations of Erzulie, Hurston indicates that Janie has succeeded in integrating all aspects of black womanhood in her journey; and upon her return, she shares with Pheoby the specifics of the adventures through which she has achieved this integration.

Janie begins her story at the point at which her “ conscious life” (10) began—at the age of sixteen, when she lay under a blossoming pear tree in her back

yard. As she watches a bee pollinate a bloom on the pear tree, Janie experiences her sexual awakening. She identifies with the pear tree (“ Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!”); and as she leans over the gate post, “ waiting for the world to be made,” she commits herself to finding “ a bee to her bloom” (Their Eyes 11, 31). The recurring metaphors of the blossoming pear tree and the horizon (the world) frame and help to unify Janie’s quest. The pear tree symbolizes unpossessive, mutually affirming, passionate love—the idyllic union of equals. In using organic imagery to symbolize Janie’s dawning awareness of herself as a woman, Hurston elevates her protagonist’s sexual awakening above the profane stereotypes imposed on black women’s sexuality by society; and she legitimates passion and sexual desire as natural, rather than aberrant, aspects of black womanhood. The horizon symbolizes the life experiences that are necessary to achieve a complete awareness of self, including meaningful participation in the traditions of the black community (Hemenway 239). The imagery symbolizes the inner (spiritual) and outer (material) aspects of life, respectively; and the successful integration of the pear tree vision and the horizon signifies the telos of Janie’s quest to selfhood.

Voodoo imbues the imagery with another level of symbolic significance. The tree and the horizon are both symbols connected to the loa Legba, who, in keeping with the ceremonial order of the Voodoo religion, is the first loa ‘ summoned’ in the novel. Legba, like the tree, symbolizes the connection between heaven and earth, the spiritual and material worlds. He is the gatekeeper, the lord of the crossroads, who provides “ the way to all things” (Tell My Horse 393). As the bridge that the Vodouisant uses to transverse

into the spiritual realm of the loa, Legba aptly represents Janie's spiritual awakening. Along with Legba, Erzulie Freda, the loa of ideal dreams, hopes and aspirations, is invoked in Janie's pear tree vision. It is said that "Erzulie looks into mirrors and dreams of perfection" ("Erzulie Freda," Sossyete); and as Janie—who is described as having "glossy leaves and bursting buds" (11)—looks into the mirror of the pear tree, she dreams of the perfect union of equals.

With her dawning awareness of self, Janie is poised to accept the Call to Adventure of the archetypal quester. However, before Janie can embark on her journey to the horizon in her quest to actualize the pear tree vision, her quest is indefinitely deferred by her grandmother Nanny. Nanny, whose world-view establishes the contrast between the 'real' or ordinary world and Janie's vision, witnesses Janie kissing a neighbor boy over the front gate and immediately declares Janie "a woman" (12). As a former slave who was raped by her master and bore his child, Janie's mother, Nanny embodies society's conventional notions of black women as "mules," "work oxes," and "brood sows" (15). She tells Janie, "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high . . . fulfil[ling] dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do" (15). However, Nanny's life experiences enable her to testify only to her racial and sexual oppression as a black woman. Nanny wants to see Janie safe in life, and safety for her means a life that mirrors as closely as possible the material stability and social status of the white middle-class. Consequently, she has arranged a marriage for Janie; and she has chosen Logan Killicks, a widower much older than Janie who has the only organ in the town and owns sixty acres of land (22).

Janie, incapable at this point of expressing her own desires, refuses her Call to Adventure in exchange for security and seeks a way to meld Nanny's vision with her own. She reasons that with the legal union of marriage comes love: "Husbands and wives loved each other and that was what marriage meant" (20). However, living with Killicks on the back road isolates Janie from the larger community, and Killicks ultimately attempts to turn her into the 'mule' Nanny sought to prevent her from becoming. Consequently, Janie realizes that the institution of marriage does not guarantee the love she envisions; and with this realization, "she became a woman" (24). It is the first significant lesson of Janie's adult life.

Disappointed in her first attempt at love, Janie turns her attention to the horizon. She meets Joe Starks, a stylishly dressed man from the city who is traveling through town on his way to Eatonville, Florida, where he plans on being "a big voice" (28). Janie is initially skeptical of Joe because "he doesn't represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees;" however, he does "speak for far horizon . . . for change and chance" (28). The prospect of fulfilling her dream of the horizon renews Janie's hope for fulfillment of her dream of romantic love, and she leaves Logan to accompany Joe to Eatonville.

In her marriage to Joe, Janie channels Erzulie Freda. Like Freda, who prefers sweetened drinks and sweet food, Janie, when she initially meets Joe, tells him that she drinks sweetened water (27). In fact, Joe's relationship with Janie resembles that of the Haitian male devotees of Erzulie Freda, a kept woman who does not work and who eschews menial labor. As the wife of the

storekeeper, postmaster and mayor of Eatonville, Janie has material comforts and enjoys a social status that sets her above and apart from the common townspeople. In this respect, Janie's marriage to Joe perpetuates Nanny's vision of material stability and respectability.

Joe "classes off" (107) Janie; he isolates her from the community, forbids her to engage in the daily store porch conversations with other townsfolk, and he excludes her from the observances of the town's rituals and traditions. He reasons that as the wife of Eatonville's "big voice," Janie should be satisfied to sit silently and submissively on her social throne. However, the potential power of Janie's voice is indicated when she publicly compliments Joe on the way he handles a community dispute, and one of the men comments: "Yo' wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts" (55). Janie's voice has the potential to build and affirm the community, while Joe's "big voice" seeks submission and imposes divisiveness. Janie, in her effort to transform Joe into a "bee for her bloom" (31), initially submits to Joe's control, allowing him to place her on a pedestal. However, she soon realizes that she has, again, equated marriage with her pear tree vision and that her ideal has, again, been debased.

As Joe continues to deny Janie's freedom of expression and participation in the community, the organic imagery is revived; Janie discovers that she has "no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man" (68). The revival of the pear tree imagery indicates the progress of Janie's developing self. After twenty years of marriage, she is much more aware of the differences between women and men and of how these differences negatively influence

the status of women within their relationships and within the community. She continues to make an outward show of obedience to Joe while she nurtures and protects her innermost self. She realizes that “ she was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (67).

This new stage in Janie’s self-discovery is foreshadowed when Joe orders Janie to tie her hair up in a head rag so that she is less attractive to the town’s men. Having to wear the head rag is a serious point of contention for Janie and marks the beginning of her fighting back against Joe. The conscious defiance on Janie’s part conjures the figuration of the petro loa, Erzulie Danto, who is sometimes envisioned wearing a moshwa, or head scarf (Filan 1). Danto, a fearsome defender of women, gives her female devotees the strength to endure and to overcome adversity and the confidence to stand up for themselves, which is exactly what Janie does in compartmentalizing the inner and outer aspects of herself.

The invocation of Erzulie Danto also heralds Janie’s coming to voice. When Janie makes a mistake measuring a quantity of tobacco in the store, Joe uses the incident as an opportunity to attack her womanhood in a way he hasn’t before: “ A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalum and still can’t cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don’t stand dere rollin’ yo’ pop eyes at me wid yo’ rump hangin’ nearly to yo’ knees” (74). Janie’s bitterness and resentment boil over; and for the first time ever, she stands in the middle of the store in front of all of the men and responds: “ Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’. . . . But Ah’m a woman every inch of me, and Ah

know it. . . . Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change of life" (74-75).

Janie's attack on Joe indicates her awareness of and increasing confidence in her femaleness. In confronting Joe she publicly exposes the ineffectiveness of his masculine authority, which goes to the very core of his being; and she speaks herself down from the pedestal upon which he has set her as an outward sign of his status and power. As a result, she and Joe are permanently estranged. The damage to Joe's psyche contributes to his already failing health, resulting in his death.

After Joe's death, Janie, in keeping with the quest paradigm, takes stock of herself. She confronts those social conventions that have restricted and limited her growth; and she finally rejects Joe's and Nanny's value system, which privileges material possessions and social status over spiritual freedom and romantic love, and the imitation of white success over the celebration of the lives of black folk. She reflects:

She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; . . . But she had been run off down a back road after things. . . .

Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon . . . and pinched it into such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (85)

With Joe's death, Janie becomes an active agent in her own life and is finally poised to accept the quester's Call to Adventure. It is Verigible "Tea Cake"

Woods who will facilitate Janie's physical journey and around whom all of the imagery of the novel comes together.

Tea Cake embodies the organic union of Janie's pear tree vision; he is "a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (102). He also embodies Erzulie Freda's ideal of the perfect lover. Just as Freda craves sweets, Janie wants "things sweet" (23) in her relationship. Tea Cake's name indicates that Janie's desire is satisfied in her union with him. Perfumes and flowers are traditional offerings to Erzulie Freda; Tea Cake "seems to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps" (99).

Tea Cake also speaks for horizon. His last name, Woods, connects him with the symbolism of the tree and thus with Legba, the spirit of the fields, the woods and the general outdoors. Tea Cake is, for Janie, the "Son of Evening Sun" (169), which is also an allusion to Legba, who has been described as "the Orient, the East, the sun and the place the sun rises" ("Vodoun," *The Mystica*). Janie and Tea Cake's relationship symbolizes the melding of African American southern folklore and Haitian Voodoo. Also, Janie physically resembles the mulatta goddess Erzulie Freda, while Tea Cake has the black skin of Erzulie Danto. Their union foreshadows the integration of the two aspects of the loa in Janie's life.

Janie and Tea Cake's relationship indicates the culmination of the mythology surrounding Erzulie Freda. Just as "troubled dreams" (Tell My Horse 387) are a signal that a man has been called as a devotee of Erzulie Freda, Tea Cake tells Janie that his sleep has been troubled by dreams of touching her long, thick hair, an attribute she shares with Erzulie Freda. Janie begins wearing

the color blue—Erzulie’s color—because Tea Cake loves her in blue. Erzulie is considered a triple goddess. As such, she has three husbands: Damballah, the sky god; Agwe, the sea god; and Ogoun, the god of fire and iron. Janie’s wedding to Tea Cake, at which they both wear blue, is Janie’s third marriage, mirroring Erzulie Freda’s three husbands.

Through her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie enters into communion with the world. Tea Cake takes Janie dancing and to the movies; he teaches her to fish, to hunt, to play checkers and to drive. Within the context of the quest paradigm, Tea Cake is Janie’s mentor and helper. He helps Janie to gain confidence and insight, and he accompanies her on her journey as an equal partner in confronting the journey’s trials. Tea Cake also, channeling Legba, facilitates Janie’s “ crossing of the threshold” from the ordinary or everyday world (Eatonville) into the “ world of adventure,” when he and Janie move to the muck on the Florida Everglades.

Janie’s pear tree vision is actualized in her marriage to Tea Cake, and their idyllic union flourishes on the muck. However, Janie tells Pheoby before she and Tea Cake leave Eatonville, “ Ah wants to utilize mahself all over” (107). In order to achieve this level of agency and autonomy, there are aspects of Janie’s identity that must still be developed, aspects that invoke the figuration of Erzulie Freda’s alter ego, Erzulie Danto. Janie begins to embrace these aspects of herself when she and Tea Cake move to the muck with its “ rich black earth” (125), an image which evokes Erzulie Danto’s black skin. The description of the workers who settle on the muck reflects Janie’s introduction to the working-class folk identity that characterizes Erzulie

Danto: “ Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor” (125). Janie immerses herself in the life of the folk and becomes an accepted participant in the community. While Joe required her silence and submission, Janie and Tea Cake are peers and co-workers. They work side-by-side on the muck, picking beans. Janie learns to shoot and becomes a better shot than Tea Cake. She develops her story telling skills and adds her voice to the others on the muck. Their house becomes the center of the community.

On the muck, which represents the poor, working-class folk that Hurston loved so much, Janie and Tea Cake accomplish what Hurston herself aims to accomplish with her novel: a redefinition of the black community that acknowledges and privileges the unique gifts of all of its members. This act of communal re-creation is explicit in Janie’s and Tea Cake’s befriending of the Bahamans or “ Saws” who work on the muck and perform their drum rituals and fire dances in secret, away from the scornful eyes of the Americans. Rather than demanding that the “ Saws” relinquish their practices and traditions in order to gain acceptance, Janie and Tea Cake assimilate the Bahamans and their unique cultural expressions into the community that they have created on the muck.

However, the idyll on the muck cannot last. Just as the archetypal quester must confront trials and tests along his or her journey, Janie must ultimately confront those societal—and natural—forces that proscribe her journey to

selfhood. Ironically, while Tea Cake facilitates Janie's quest, he ultimately problematizes its successful completion. This stage of Janie's quest finds its context within the mythology surrounding Erzulie Freda, who embodies all that is good and noble about love as well as all that is unattainable or painful about it (Collins 148). The Haitian rituals honoring Erzulie Freda begin with gaiety, as the loa's 'horse' greets and flirts with the men; however, they typically end with inconsolable weeping, as the loa recalls a past betrayal or disappointment (Collins 138). Derek Collins explains: "Erzulie Freda is . . . intrinsically unable to be satisfied by, or truly able to satisfy another in love. Although she may offer men the most bounteous and perfect love, it is fleeting, perhaps because such a full and overflowing love is beyond the capacity of men to keep" (148-49). This aspect of the mythology surrounding the loa manifests when Tea Cake discovers that Mrs. Turner, who operates a diner on the muck, plans to fix Janie up with her brother. Although Janie has given no indication that she is receptive to Mrs. Turner's plans, Tea Cake gives in to his male insecurities and slaps Janie around in order to show Mrs. Turner and the people on the muck "who is boss" (141).

This incident signals the beginning of the end of Janie and Tea Cake's idyllic union and sets in motion the events that will culminate in the supreme ordeal—the central life-or-death crisis ("Ageless Wisdom," Divine)—of Janie's quest. Tea Cake's actions indicate a need for an outward show of his possession, which places him in the same league with Joe Starks. However, while Janie's treatment at Starks' hands brings her to voice and self-awareness, her love for Tea Cake is "self-crushing" (122). She seems satisfied to subordinate her life to Tea Cake's. Hurston culls this situation

from her personal experience. When Hurston's lover, who inspired *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, hit her in the heat of an argument, Hurston did not retaliate, nor did she immediately end the relationship. However, as she relates, her uncharacteristic passivity made her realize that "she had lost hold of herself" (qtd. in Boyd 275). The realization frightened her, and she soon left her lover in order to regain control of herself and her life.

Similarly, Janie has lost hold of herself in her relationship with Tea Cake; and Hurston realizes—even if Janie does not—that Janie will have to proceed on her journey without Tea Cake if she is to reclaim herself. The dilemma for Hurston is to devise a way to set Janie back on the path to self-realization, autonomy and independence while preserving the integral aspects of Janie's identity that she has gained as a result of her 'perfect' union with Tea Cake. Janie, satisfied that she has achieved the ultimate treasure of womanhood in her marriage to Tea Cake, is reluctant to leave. Consequently, just as the reluctant quester may require supernatural forces to urge him or her on, Hurston draws on the forces of nature—as t