

# Hurston's and larsen's commentary on racial loyalty



Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston and Passing by Nella Larsen both feature black females as their main characters. Hurston's novel follows a woman named Janie through her life, while Larsen's follows Clare, a black woman who passes for white. The similarities continue through the ending of each novel, since in each case a main character dies. In Hurston's case, Janie ends up killing her husband, Tea Cake. In Larsen's case, Clare dies under unclear circumstances. By looking at the differences between Clare's and Janie's choices and their outcomes, one can argue that Janie was able to find peace in her life, while Clare left an unfulfilled life behind. If one regards these works as part of a wider commentary, one can find that Clare's death serves as punishment for her attempts to erase her blackness, while Janie's peace serves as a reward for embracing hers.

Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the main character Janie recognizes and embraces her blackness. This is the standard way in which she lives her life. Janie even mentions the first time she learned that she was black, when she saw a photograph of herself and the white children she played with: "Aw, aw! Ah'm colored," [1] she remembers thinking. This part of her identity is constantly brought up as she relays her story to her friend Phoebe. At sixteen, she remembers, her Nanny tells her that black women are "de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston, 186). The three men Janie marries are all black, and she moves with Joe Starks to build up Eatonville, a historic black town. Once Janie learns about her race, she is never shown questioning it or attempting to hide her blackness. On the other hand, Clare is introduced in *Passing* as a white woman. In fact, until Irene tells the reader about Clare's background, she is understood as white.

Clare's introduction and storyline center around the fact that she chooses to pass as white. Clare even discusses "passing" with Irene, saying, "I've often wondered why more colored girls...never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do" [2]. Throughout the novel, Clare slowly attempts to re-integrate herself with black society; however, her starting point is as a white-passing black woman.

At the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is forced to shoot her husband, Tea Cake. He had become infected with rabies, and had tried to kill Janie, so she was forced to defend herself. Janie finds herself on trial for his murder; the jury is told that it must decide if Janie is guilty or if "she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy" (Hurston, 329). The verdict will decide Janie's fate, and will effectively tell whether or not Janie is a good wife or a murderer. After the hearing, the jury quickly deliberates and comes back with a verdict of innocent. The jurors state: "we find the death of Vergible [Tea Cake] Woods to be entirely accidental and justifiable, and that no blame should rest upon the defendant Janie Woods" (Hurston, 329). This verdict, coupled with the quick forgiveness Janie receives from Tea Cake's friends, clears Janie in all respects, leaving little room for questions about Janie's morality.

In contrast, though Clare spends *Passing* attempting to join black society through Irene, she is ultimately unsuccessful. The only thing keeping her from fully participating is her husband Jack, who believes that Clare is white. Clare tells Irene this, saying, "if Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn't it?" (Larsen, 106). Ultimately, Jack does find out about <https://assignbuster.com/hurstons-and-larsens-commentary-on-racial-loyalty/>

Clare's race, mere moments before she falls out of a window to her death. After Clare falls out of the window, the inspectors who come to the scene wisely describe her fate as "death by misadventure" (Larsen, 114). Although the inspector probably meant that Clare was having too much fun or had too much to drink at the party, the line can be viewed in a much wider context. By this way of thinking, Clare's "misadventure" was her attempt to pass as white. Ultimately, this is what led to her death.

Janie, however, is ultimately able to lead a fulfilling life. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes the reader from her first sexual awakening through most of her adult life, to a time when she eventually finds happiness. As she wraps up her story, Janie tells Phoebe, "so Ah'm back home again and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah." (Hurston, 332). Janie goes on to notice that her house no longer feels empty, and she grows to understand that Tea Cake's spirit lives on within her. She finishes her story with a definitive statement: "'Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves'" (Hurston, 332). Janie's peace is a reflection of her ability to "find out about livin'," both through her various husbands and through her other life experiences, which each acknowledging or even centered on Janie's blackness.

However, Clare's life is unfulfilled. She is never able to fully re-join black society before her death and therefore never fully embraces her black identity. This fate was foreshadowed in Gertrude and Irene's conversation after meeting Jack: "'She seems satisfied enough. She's got what she wanted, and the other day she told me it was worth it,'" Irene ventures. However, "Gertrude was skeptical. 'She'll find out different,' was her

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verdict. ' She'll find out different all right'" (Larsen, 44). In light of *Passing* as a whole, Clare's choices do not seem to be worth it at all. In fact, they seem to be the reason she ends up being confronted by her husband, ultimately leading to her fall.

Clare's death is a clear punishment for her choice to pass as white, while Janie's ultimate happiness is a reward for her racial loyalty, teaching that it is wrong to deny one's racial identity. Of course, this interpretation comes with many assumptions, some of them worth debating. For example, it is assumed that a character's blackness overtakes his or her white ancestry. This idea is based in a historical tradition called the "one drop rule" which dictates that anyone with a small amount of black ancestry is automatically black. While some might argue that this is an unfair assumption to make, it is the assumption that the societies in which these novels were set would have made, so it is acceptable for Hurston and Larsen.

## Bibliography

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