

# Voice and language in their eyes were watching god

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Voice and Language in Their Eyes Were Watching God Oprisor Maria 1st year American Studies Voice and Language in Their Eyes Were Watching God In this paper I would like to focus on point of view and some aspects of stylistics in Zora Hurstons' work Their Eyes Were Watching God. In particular, I will address the issue of narrative voice, the shifts between first person and third person, and I will also include in my analysis some aspects related to types of language variety and style variation.

I have chosen this text because generally it is considered Zora Neale Hurston's most important piece of fiction, and because it is a proof of her ability to master language and voice. To illustrate my analysis I have selected some fragments which can be found at the end of the paper. I will make references to them whenever is necessary. The novel presents, in a combination of first and third person narration the story of Jamie Crawford and her three successive husbands. At several points in the text, Janie Crawford is prohibited from speaking, while at other points she chooses not to speak.

Silence, then, is sometimes used as a tool of oppression and at other times as a tool of power. Even from the beginning of the novel it can be easily noticed the shifting narration; the viewpoint has moved from " every men" to " men" to " women" to " a woman" all these under the form of gossip of the front porch (see quote 1). While the earliest feminist interpretations put forward the idea that Janie achieves selfhood by claiming her voice, Barbara Johnson asserts that it is by accepting the inevitability of self-division that Janie gains the power of speech.

She shows how Janie's discovery that " she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them"(Johnson: 50) has implications for Janie's ability to speak. There are two paragraphs that highlight this aspect of inside and outside in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (see quote 2). It can be noticed the image of Jody as an insider and in the second quote her image but this time as an outsider. Now she realizes that " looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams".

This proves that the inside and outside are never the same. When reading the novel the reader is introduced into a world where perspective and voice are in a permanent shift but it does not give the impression of unreliable narrators. The view point is controlled through a linguistic indicator of viewpoint, namely deixis. This is proved by adverbials of place like there and verbs like come. (see quote 2). Moreover through the novel we can mention the presence of social deixis\_: Mr. and Mrs. \_Turner or \_Mrs. \_Bogle: " Mrs.

Bogle who was many times a grandmother, but had a blushing air of coquetry about her that cloaked her sunken cheeks. "(p. 230) When speaking about types of language variety we certainly can include dialect when analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Zora Hurston manages, with great literary craftsmanship, to represent not only the speech and thought of her protagonist but also of the collective black community. She succeeds in doing this through free indirect speech. In the novel's frame tale, Janie returns to Eatonville after a long absence.

Townpeople sit on porches exchanging words full of drama and metaphor. In this context it is to be mentioned that phonetic changes as well as morphological changes exist at the level of the language. (see quote 3) Through all novel there are wonderful examples of dialogues that show literary craftsmanship of the twentieth-century Southern black vernacular speech. In terms of style variation, this is obvious at almost every page. It is easily detectable the “ Systematic variation from one identifiable kind of language to another within the same text”(Short: 1996)/ (see quote 3).

All these demonstrate, without error, the way in which Zora Neale Hurston masters language and voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston's great accomplishment is the creation of a literary language equivalent to the oral performances she admired as a child and studied as an ethnographer. Vernacular voices speak in and through the novel and the novel's words “[walk] without masters. ” *Their Eyes* is a singular achievement. Quote 1: “ Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide.

For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget...So the beginning of this was a woman, and she had come back from burying a dead...”(p. 175) Quote 2: “ So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned how to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor.

It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. " (p. 232) ~~~~~ " Janie stood where he left for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was.

It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about.

Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. 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. " In the first paragraph the " marriage" moves outward from the bedroom to the parlor, replacing itself with the image of virginity. The second paragraph represents her image of Jody, but an image of an outsider. Now she realizes that " looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams".

Both paragraphs are an externalization of Janie's feelings onto the outer surroundings. In figurative language, Barbara Johnson observes, "inside and outside are never the same" and she asserts that "Far from being an expression of Janie's new wholeness or identity as a character, Janie's increasing ability to speak grows out of her ability not to mix inside with outside...". (p. 233) Quote 3: "Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish.

They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song. What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? -- Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? -- Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? -- What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? - Thought she was going to marry? -- Where he left her? -- What he done wid all her money? -- Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs -- why she don't stay in her class? "(p. 175)

References: Barbara, Johnson, Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God, in Wall, 2000, ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S Their Eyes Were Watching God, New York: Oxford University Press. Short, M. , 1996, Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose, London, New York: Longman. Zora, N. , Hurston, 2002, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Library of America.