

Zora neale hurston's
their eyes were
watching god: plot,
themes, characters,
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Their Eyes Were Watching God

Summary

Throughout the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, the readers observe the development of a young African American woman as she chases after her dreams. The novel commences by introducing a middle aged lady, named Janie, as she walks towards her house. As she is doing so, the other residents in town gossip about her personal affairs, such as her decision to marry and to abscond with a poor young man named Tea Cake. Based on the dirty overalls she wears, they also assume that he has stolen most of her fortune. Soon after, Janie discloses her entire life story to her inquiring companion named Pheoby.

When she was young, she and her grandmother occupied a small house that was located in a white woman's backyard. Eventually, the odd family moved into a tiny cottage of their own. Immediately upon turning sixteen, Janie began to desire the love portrayed by the bees and the blooms on the trees in her backyard. When Janie's grandmother discovered her kissing a man, she decided it was time to marry Janie off. The grandmother chose a man called Logan Killicks, mainly because of his advanced social status and his ability to supply Janie with the protection that she could no longer provide. Months after they were married, Logan began to treat Janie harshly, such as forcing her to complete unladylike tasks.

One day, while Janie was working a rich confident man ambled by and started to act flirtatious towards her. After two weeks of secretly conversing with the man, named Jody Starks, he asked Janie to travel with him to a new

black community in Florida. The next day, she deserted Logan and married Jody, and they subsequently traveled to the town. Within hours of their arrival, the couple rented a house and Jody resolved to purchase two hundred acres of land to contribute to the community. Much to the astonishment of the citizens, he successfully built a store, a post office, and constructed roads for public use. Jody soon acquired a profit, despite his contributions to the community, mainly by selling the plots of land that he had bought when he had first arrived. Later on, he was elected mayor of the town, called Eatonville, by an informal vote at a public gathering. Soon after, Janie began to feel the jealousy of the other townswomen and noticed the way in which the other men cowered before Jody, probably because of his many possessions.

Even so, the residents questioned how Janie was able to endure her husband's mistreatment towards her. Jody prevented her from conversing on the store's porch, and forced her to cover her beautiful hair with a rag. After spending years in these conditions, Janie internalized her thoughts and learned to hold her tongue. She realized that Jody was not the true bees to her blossoming tree, and she began to conserve herself for another man. Later on, Janie noticed how old her husband had become. Hence, when Jody began to ridicule Janie's aging body one day, she in turn indicated to his crumbling appearance before the entire store. Janie's spouse then retaliated by moving his belongings into another room downstairs. Later on, Jody's health began to deteriorate, which caused Janie to send for a doctor. After the physician informed her that her husband's death was inevitable, she

delivered the news to Jody. Janie then communicated all of her unexpressed emotions to her husband, and he died moments later.

Promptly following this event, she began to express her new found freedom by uncovering her hair and participating in conversations on the store's porch. Without delay, suitors started to travel considerable distances to flirt with her, though only one man, named Tea Cake, captured her attention. In due time, Janie began to fall in love with him, even though she feared that he only wanted her for her money. One day, the couple traveled to a town picnic in a lemon car that Tea Cake had bought just for that occasion. As a result, the new lovers became the center of much conversation. These discussions prompted Pheoby to express her fear that Janie would be taken advantage of. Janie rebuffed this statement and told of her plans to leave town, so that she could live a new life based solely on her love for her boyfriend. Shortly afterwards, the couple abandoned the community and traveled to Jacksonville, where they were married. About a week later, Tea Cake took Janie's money and deserted her, which caused her to assume that she had been deceived. Surprisingly, her husband soon returned, using his gambling skills to earn back the money he had previously spent on a guitar and a party.

In due time, the couple moved to the Everglades before the other employees arrived, so that they could obtain a house. Once migrant work became available, Tea Cake would tend the fields while Janie remained at home. This plan turned out to be short lived, because he became so lonely that she elected to aid him in his work. As time elapsed, Janie reveled in her new

freedoms and felt pity for the status obsessed citizens of her previous town. After the harvesting period was over, the newlyweds resolved to remain in the Everglades during the off season. During their time off, the couple was able to socialize and enjoy their marriage, though the new working period eventually began.

As the days passed, a large amount of people decided to evacuate the swamps because of an impending hurricane. The lovers elected to stay, though they were soon forced onto a dangerous journey because of flooding. During their trek, Tea Cake defended Janie from an attacking dog and was bitten during the struggle. The couple ultimately found a safe area and returned to their house after the cyclone. A month after this occurred, Tea Cake arrived home with a headache, though he was also having trouble eating and drinking. A doctor diagnosed him with rabies and ordered the necessary medication, though he believed that it was too late to save him. Hours later, Janie discovered a pistol under her husband's pillow and set the gun so that it would require three pulls of the trigger to reach the ammunition. This action gave her time to act when he eventually attempted to murder her. When Tea Cake, in his paranoid state, tried to slaughter her with the weapon, she was forced to kill him to save herself. After a brief trial, Janie was acquitted of murder and was finally able to grieve over her spouse's death. She resolved to spend her fortune on an amazing funeral for her deceased husband, and eventually returned to Eatonville.

Finished with her story, Janie tells Pheoby that she is now content to live in her previous town, since Tea Cake has fulfilled her dreams of true love. Later in bed, Janie reflects on the peace that her late husband has given her.

Themes

While examining the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, the contrasting themes of love and security become apparent. In the beginning of the story, Janie's grandmother demands that she marry Logan, mainly because of a need for protection as well as social status. Janie agrees to the arrangement, even if she only longs for the love that the bees and the trees represent. Here, one can see the contrasting values between Janie and her grandmother. Janie desires the romance marriage should provide, while her grandmother, a former slave, hopes that her granddaughter will have the protection she never had. Later on, she deserts Logan and marries Jody for the material goods and protection he can provide her with. Without even realizing it, Janie herself has chosen another husband based on her grandmother's values, based on the security he is able to provide. Thus, through every marriage the clashing ideals of passion and protection are present.

Another topic present throughout Janie's adventure is the idea of social status, which is mainly viewed between the African Americans in their own communities. On several occasions, Jody has forbidden Janie from participating in an activity because of her advanced social status. One instance of this is the conversations on the store porch. This concept is even present during the very beginning of the novel, where the citizens of

Eatonville are shocked by Janie's overalls. Moreover, the other migrant
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workers are surprised that someone of Janie's wealth would toil with people that are so below her level. Thus, social status is present in most societies, which is illustrated through Janie's many encounters with the upper and lower classes. By analyzing Hurston's novel, the topics of security, love, and social status become extremely discernible.

Characters

Janie- Probably the most dynamic character of the story, Janie's journey changes her personality as well as her values. In the beginning of the novel, she is a relatively quiet child dependent on her grandmother financially and for guidance. When Janie is first wed to Logan, she still believes in her grandmother's promises of romance coming after marriage. She eventually loses faith in her grandmother's assurances and hopes that Jody will fulfill Janie's dreams. As Janie performs her role as a mayor's wife, she soon becomes extremely lonely and isolated from the rest of society. She eventually submits to her husband's every wish, and loses her already quiet voice in the process. After Jody's death, Janie again finds her voice and does as she pleases. After going through so much hardship, Janie seems weary of a new relationship. However, once she becomes Tea Cake's wife, she feels the joy and fulfillment she has always desired. She becomes a hardworking and mature person that will overcome severe hardship for herself, as well as her husband. When Tea Cake eventually attempts to kill Janie, she now has enough confidence and independence to save herself. As a result of her journey, Janie truly becomes the individualistic yet loving person she is meant to be.

Tea Cake- Though he is only with Janie for a relatively short amount of time, Tea Cake's loving and adventurous nature is all Janie hopes for in a man. Tea Cake proves himself to be a persistent person when he first meets her, since he continues to act lovingly towards her, despite her declaration that they are just friends. He treats Janie as an equal and teaches her many skills, such as how to play checkers. He is also hardworking, since instead of living off of Janie's vast wealth, he toils in the field to support them. Janie's spouse eventually makes the ultimate sacrifice by saving her from a rabid dog and unknowingly contaminates himself in the process.

Jody- When Jody is first introduced, he appears to be an ambitious business man that will fulfill Janie's dreams of romance. Although, as time continues on, Jody illustrates his need for power by trading his private life for authority. He seems to be partially driven to action by his insecurities. During one such instance of this, Jody begins to mention Janie's old age in an attempt to hide his own flaws. Though power crazed and unconfident, Jody does seem to genuinely love Janie. At times, he does attempt to make her happy, such as when he saves a mule for her approval. In trying to hide his old age, Jody refuses to see an actual doctor, which makes a simple kidney problem fatal.

Structure

As a person analyzes Their Eyes Were Watching God, unique plot structures and varying dialect become apparent to the reader. Based on the education of the character speaking, the amount of slang or grammar used differs. If one were to compare Janie's speech abilities to that of the prosecutor's speaking capacity during her murder trial, the differences would be

extremely apparent. The prosecutor adheres to the rules of Standard
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English, which is evident when saying “ We are handling this case. Another word out of you...”. On the other hand, Janie misuses her sentence structures and pronunciation, which is evident when she says “ Ah guess standin’ in uh store do make...”. Through this tactic, the audience is able to grasp some of a character’s background through only a sentence of speech. Despite this fact, Janie utilizes proper English during her internal monologue and narration. This incredible variation is most likely used so as to not confuse the readers and to create a clearer description than only slang can provide.

Hurston also manipulates the amount of communication between Janie and the other characters, based on the events that occur. During the time that she spends with Jody, she barely converses with anyone besides her husband. However, she begins to talk with Pheoby, among other people, after his death. In this way, Hurston is able to use speech as a method of hinting at Jody’s influence over Janie, since he prevents her from speaking with the other residents. After her spouse’s death, she once again has the freedom to converse with the other characters. Because of the way in which the dialogue is used, communication seems to become a symbol of the amount of freedom Janie has at a given time.

Moreover, Janie recounts her story after she returns from her adventures with Tea Cake. This means that the readers understand the results of her journey, but not the reasons and events behind it. This can be seen as a cliffhanger, which creates suspense for the audience and prompts them to continue to read. Overall, Hurston’s use of different types of dialect, her

manipulation on the amount of dialogue, and use of an original plot structure further enhances her story.

Opinion

While reading Zora Neale Hurston's novel, one is able to view the development of an innocent girl into an independent woman. Despite this, it can occasionally become difficult to immerse oneself into the story. Occasionally, the reader is tempted to reread the conversation a character is having, because of the harsh dialect used. Though this improper grammar and spelling portrays the education of the speaker, such garbled speech can become distracting as well as confusing. Also, Hurston's relatively simple plot can become rather tedious. Janie's entire life is based upon the relationships she has with men, so that none of the other hardships or personality qualities she has are explored. This novel is about a woman's relations and nothing more, which creates a one sided account of Janie's life. Furthermore, it seems as if Janie only thinks about her relationships with one man or another, so that she never portrays any deep thinking that would have made the novel interesting. In addition, at the end of the novel, Janie claims to have been to " the horizon and back", though she has experienced very few of the enjoyments in life. She has never longed to have a child, and thus has never enjoyed that experience. Janie's simplistic drive to meet her soul mate causes her to lack the ability to truly enjoy the beauties of life. Because of the overly harsh dialect, simple plot, and shallow main character, some readers may not enjoy Hurston's novel.