

Rhetorical analysis
essay for their eyes
were watching god
essay



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Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of one black woman's attempt to realize her dreams and to achieve happiness in her life. Throughout the book, the reader follows Janie Woods as she travels from one man to the next and from one town to the next in search of happiness, freedom, and love. Janie abandons her first husband and the oppressive, conventional life that she lives with him in order to pursue a more stimulating, adventurous, and exciting one with Jody Sparks.

With his big dreams for the future and his plans to build an "all-colored" town, Jody seems at first to embody the very things that Janie is seeking in life, but he very quickly turns out to be as oppressive and restrictive as Janie's first husband. When he dies, however, both Janie and the reader become acquainted with Tea Cake, a relatively poor yet nonetheless charming man who professes his love to Janie and asks her to run away with him to the Everglades. Janie does, and it becomes clear that Tea Cake and Janie are the perfect fit.

With Tea Cake, Janie is happier than she has ever been, and it seems that she will finally achieve her dreams. When Tea Cake becomes infected with rabies and shoots at Janie with a gun, however, Janie is forced to kill him in a devastating twist of plot. Afterwards, Janie is thrown into jail and then tried by jury in order to decide if she will be convicted of murdering Tea Cake. If she is convicted, her life and her quest for happiness and the pursuit of her dreams will be destroyed. If she is allowed to go free, she can continue her life and her quest for happiness.

In this pivotal courthouse scene, the climax of the story of Janie's struggle to achieve happiness and the deciding moment of her fate, Zora Neale Hurston uses figurative language, varied sentence structure, and a unique, circular kind of organization of the passage in order to build tension and suspense and to create a vivid image of the courthouse and of the events of the trial for the reader. The passage begins with a series of very strong and powerful images of the black people in the courthouse, who are standing in the back "Packed tight like a case of celery. This simile produces the feeling that these people are strong, standing strong and straight and tall. They are stern, unmoving and unbending, and they are all " against her. " Hurston emphasizes this idea – the idea that the blacks are all against Janie – by repeating the phrase twice. The first time, there is no idea attached to the phrase other than the idea that Janie is alone, that this solid, tightly-packed celery-wall of her people has disowned her, is standing against her.

The second time she repeats the phrase, however, Hurston says in clear hyperbole, " so many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat her to death. " This statement brings a new dimension to the blacks' angry, stern demeanor. Not only are they large in number and stern and disapproving of Janie, but, moreover, they feel violent towards her. Janie is a target, the reader discovers in the following sentence, for the black people's " dirty thoughts" which " pelt" her. Janie is their prey, and they are armed with the " weapons" of their tongues.

These weapons are " cocked and loaded," ready to fire at any moment. With this metaphor, which indirectly compares the people's tongues to guns,

Hurston not only continues to communicate the very real and intense
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hostility that the blacks are feeling towards Janie but also introduces another sort of dimension to the atmosphere she is describing: tension. The image of a cocked and loaded gun just waiting for the trigger to be pulled and the explosion to occur creates a very extreme mood – one of immense tension, pressure, and apprehension.

All of the people, however, are cold and silent. Although their tongues are cocked, they have not exploded yet; although they are ready to slaughter and kill, to cut Janie down and “beat her to death,” they are currently only “pelting her” with their thoughts and preparing their statements, merely aiming their weapons at her head. It is thus that Hurston masterfully uses figurative language in the first paragraph in order to create a mood of tension.

In the next paragraph, however, the tension is released. All of a sudden, a “tongue storm” strikes “the Negroes.” They allow their tongues to run free “like wind among palm trees” and the waiting is over, the tension is cut. Through this simile, the tension that lies behind the silent black population’s hateful, violent thoughts is suddenly released, thus changing the feeling from one of tension, from cocked and loaded guns, to restlessness – to the agitated, impatient rustling of palm trees in a storm.

This image, one that evokes thoughts of storm, ominous gray skies and the restless rustling of the wind in the trees, contrasts eerily with simile in the sentence that follows, the description that the people spoke “all together like a choir” and that the “top parts of their bodies moved on the rhythm” of the talk. These musical references bring the description of the black people

in the back of the courthouse to a crescendo; they give the storm a musical quality so that all of the crashing and the thrashing that they are doing has rhythm, has a routine.

The townspeople are all rustling together, rustling regularly, rustling in tune with one another, and the description therefore continues to establish a mood in the courthouse that is foreboding and restless, heightening the amount of tension and suspense that the reader is experiencing. In the sentences that follow her description of the tense, charged courthouse atmosphere, Hurston next proceeds to take this restlessness, the sense of movement and energy that she has created with the storm simile, and applies it towards the actual events of the trial. Having set the scene, she can now tell about what is happening during the trial.

The way in which she chooses to do this is very interesting. Hurston transitions from her descriptive language, all in omniscient third-person narration, into a type of narration that continues to be in the third person yet appears to be in the form of the things that the black people in the courthouse are saying. “ Tea Cake was a good boy. He had been good to that woman. No...woman ain’t never been treated no better. Naw suh! ” It is through this series of dialectal sentences in the narration that Hurston communicates what the townspeople are “ testifying,” what they are saying about the whole situation.

Although there are no direct quotes, the reader can clearly tell from the declarative and exclamatory sentences that suggest dialect and contrast with the longer, more complex sentences of description that precede them

that Hurston is expressing the sentiments of the black people. Therefore, by varying the sentence structure in her narration to mirror that of the townspeople's dialect, Hurston effectively communicates the nature and spirit of the thoughts that the black community is having about Janie and about the trial to the reader.

As the passage continues, Hurston's style of narration changes again with her sentence structure. Pulling away from the concise, declarative statements that characterize the townspeople's manner of speaking. Hurston's sentences suddenly become longer, more complex, with many conjunctions: "The baliff went up and the sheriff and the judge, and the police chief, and the lawyers..." This technique, which constantly interrupts the flow of the sentences with yet another conjunction and another subordinate clause, communicates a feeling of a kind of nervous tension a feeling of rushing, a feeling of instability.

Once again, Hurston is making the characters speak without using quotation marks: she is altering her sentence structure in order to reflect the speaking style of other characters. In this case, the character whose speech she is imitating is Dr. Simmons, rambling on in a tiresome run-on sentence that finally ends but is then nervously revived in two last short sentences that follow his testimony: "And how he found Janie all bit in the arm, sitting on the floor and petting tea Cake's head when he got there. And his pistol right by his hand on the floor." It is thus that the reader is informed of Dr.

Simmons' testimony and the events of the courthouse. Transitioning from Dr. Simmons' testimony to the conclusion of the passage, Hurston uses two

short, simple lines of dialogue – the only real ones in the entire passage to act as a bridge back to the description of the black townspeople in the back of the courthouse. Hurston writes that the “ palm tree dance began again among the Negroes,” reviving the poetic characterization of the townspeople’s talk as stormy winds in the palm fronds and delicately reinstating the idea that there is a rhythmic, dance-like quality to the people’s excited, stormy speaking.

This brings the passage full circle: Hurston has returned to where she started, with a description of the restlessness and the tension that the townspeople are experiencing and creating inside of the courthouse. The reader has been carried from a powerful build-up of mood as created by Hurston’s vividly descriptive and figurative language and the images that it creates, to the testimonies of the black townspeople, to the testimony of Dr.

Simmons and finally back to the same, powerful image of the restless black townspeople and their restless talk as palm trees rustling in the storm. The final line of the passage, “ The State couldn’t rest until it heard,” which describes the tense, restless, condition of the prosecutors, once again emphasizes the amount and intensity of the tension that is alive in the courthouse. The prosecutors along with everyone else in the courthouse— simply cannot “ rest” until a decision is made and the tension is cut.

It is thus, through her descriptive language, her variation in sentence structure, and her circular organization of the passage, bringing the reader back to the same, tense, restless mood that Hurston’s descriptions of the townspeople created at the beginning of the passage that Hurston effectively

creates feelings of excitement, restlessness, and tension in the reader and conveys the progression of events in this extremely significant, climatic scene in the story.