# Their Eyes Were Watching God Study Guide

## Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.



The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Introduction

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* first appeared in 1937, it was well-received by white critics as an intimate portrait of southern blacks, but African-American reviewers rejected the novel as pandering to white audiences and perpetuating stereotypes of blacks as happy-go-lucky and ignorant. Unfortunately, the novel and its author, Zora Neale Hurston, were quickly forgotten. But within the last twenty years it has received renewed attention from scholars who praise its unique contribution to African-American literature, and it has become one of the newest and most original works to consistently appear in college courses across the country and to be included in updated versions of the American literary canon. The book has been admired by African-Americanists for its celebration of black culture and dialect and by feminists for its depiction of a woman's progress towards self-awareness and fulfillment. But the novel continues to receive criticism for what some see as its lack of engagement with racial prejudice and its ambivalent treatment of relations between the sexes. No one disputes, though, its impressive use of metaphor, dialect, and folklore of southern rural blacks, which Hurston studied as an anthropologist, to reflect the rich cultural heritage of African-Americans.

# Overview

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with a lyrical passage in which Janie Starks returns to Eatonville, Florida, where she had previously lived. The other townspeople observe her in judgment and speculate about what has brought her back. Through their dialogue, the characters of Pheoby, Janie's best friend, and Tea Cake, the young man she had left with, are introduced. Eventually, Pheoby visits Janie, who tells her that Tea Cake is "gone." The rest of the novel consists of the story Janie tells Pheoby about what has happened to her.

In Chapters 2 through 4 Janie summarizes her childhood, when she lived with her maternal grandmother, Nanny, who also cared for several white children. At one point, a photographer takes a picture of all of the children. While examining the photograph, Janie realizes that she is black, for until then she had thought she was like all of the white children. One spring afternoon years later, Janie is daydreaming under a pear tree when Johnny Taylor appears and kisses her. Nanny observes this and decides that Janie ought to get married soon. She has decided on Brother Logan Killicks as Janie's future husband; he is apparently a responsible man, but Janie does not find him attractive and cannot imagine loving him. However, Janie and Logan are married, and shortly thereafter Nanny dies.

Sometime later, Logan decides that Janie should perform more manual labor and leaves to buy a mule so that Janie can help him with the plowing. While he is gone, another man appears, a stranger to the area who identifies himself as Jody Starks. He is on his way to a town populated entirely by black people, where he has large ambitions for himself. Although Jody invites Janie to accompany him, she hesitates because she imagines how her grandmother would disapprove. When Janie threatens to leave Logan, he scorns her background. The next morning she meets Jody Starks, and they travel to Green Cove Springs where they are married.

In Chapters 5 through 9 Jody and Janie arrive in Eatonville, where Jody immediately asks to speak to the mayor and is informed that the town does not have one.

Impressing the others, Jody pays cash for two hundred acres of land and begins advertising for additional people to move to Eatonville. After opening a store, Jody is soon appointed Mayor, but discord is implied when he prevents Janie from making a speech some of the men have requested. Jody and Janie begin to grow apart emotionally.

Many of the men enjoy sitting on the store's porch and telling exaggerated stories. Although Janie longs to join in, Jody believes such activities and company are too low-class for her. Another man, Matt Bonner, owns a mule that he is working nearly to death. When Janie expresses dismay over the abuse of this mule, Jody forces Matt to sell the mule for five dollars. After the mule dies, Jody again forbids Janie to participate in the mock funeral with the rest of the town.

The tension between Jody and Janie continues to intensify, until one day Jody slaps her because his supper has been poorly cooked. Janie's image of Jody is destroyed at this moment, and although she appears to continue to be obedient, she begins separating her inner and outer lives. Then one day when Janie fails to cut a plug of tobacco properly, Jody humiliates her in front of the others, commenting on aspects of her body.

This time Janie replies, ridiculing Jody for his own lack of masculinity in front of the other men. Jody is so angry that he can respond only by hitting her.

Jody subsequently becomes ill and believes Janie has cast a spell on him. Janie sends for a doctor, who reveals that Jody's condition is fatal. Although Janie attempts to have a final conversation with him, Jody refuses to listen and dies fighting death. His funeral is large and formal.

After several months, another stranger appears. His name is Vergible Woods, but his nickname is Tea Cake. He teaches Janie to play checkers, and for the first time she feels that someone is truly treating her as an individual. They do many unconventional activities together, such as fishing at midnight, and Janie begins to fall in love with him. She hesitates to trust him, though, because she is several years older than he is and because, as Jody's heir, she is a comparatively wealthy woman. Janie decides to sell the store so that she can begin a new life with Tea Cake. He sends for her from Jacksonville, and she leaves on an early morning train. They get married immediately.

Janie has hidden two hundred dollars in a purse inside her clothes, but when she wakes up the next morning, Tea Cake is gone and so is the money. After another day, he returns with only twelve dollars; he had thrown a party but promises to win the money back gambling. When he does, Janie decides to trust him and tells him about additional money she has saved. Tea Cake suggests that they go down to the Everglades to work.

Tea Cake teaches Janie to shoot, and she becomes quite skilled. Working in the Everglades is fun for both of them; they throw parties, and Janie participates in the playful atmosphere. Janie becomes jealous of another woman who is flirting with Tea Cake, but he assures Janie that she has nothing to worry about. They decide to stay in the Everglades during the off season. Another woman, Mrs. Turner, cultivates a friendship with Janie, hoping that she will leave Tea Cake and marry Mrs. Turner's brother.

Mrs. Turner feels disdainful of other black people, especially if their complexion is particularly dark. At this point, Tea Cake becomes jealous and beats Janie in order to demonstrate to the Turners that he is the boss in his household.

Soon thereafter, a hurricane threatens the Everglades, and many of the residents leave, but Janie and Tea Cake decide to ride the storm out. When the storm becomes fierce, they sit in their cabin, appearing "to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." When the hurricane threatens to flood their house, they leave, attempting to walk toward Palm Beach. When Janie is nearly attacked by a dog, Tea Cake rescues her, but he is himself bitten. The wound appears superficial and begins to heal.

After the hurricane, black men are forced to act as grave diggers, but they must be careful to separate the white corpses from the black ones, because the white bodies will be placed in coffins while the black ones will be buried in a mass grave. After one day, Tea Cake decides they should return to the Everglades.

After three weeks, Tea Cake falls ill. He has a headache and is unable to eat or drink.

The doctor reveals that he has rabies and will likely die. He is concerned that Tea Cake will attack Janie and perhaps bite her also. Janie realizes that Tea Cake is becoming insane as his illness progresses. He eventually tries to shoot Janie, who shoots and kills him.

Janie must be tried for murder, but she is acquitted; the jury finds that she acted in self-defense. Janie provides an elaborate funeral for Tea Cake in Palm Beach. The novel concludes with a return to the conversation between Janie and Pheoby after Janie has returned to the house she lived in with Jody.

When Their Eyes Were Watching God first appeared, it was warmly received by white critics. Lucille Tompkins of the New York Times Book Review called it "a well nigh perfect story—a little sententious at the start, but the rest is simple and beautiful and shining with humor." But many of Hurston's fellow writers of the Harlem Renaissance criticized the novel for not addressing "serious" issues, namely strained race relations. Alain Locke, reviewing for Opportunity, recognized the author's "gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor," but he asks, "when will the Negro novelist of maturity .. . come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?" Richard Wright, in his review in New Masses, had even more scathing objections to the novel. According to Wright, "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which wasforced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh." Wright felt that instead of taking on "serious" subjects, she wrote to entertain "a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." Many objected to the use of dialect in the novel, a difficult subject for Harlem Renaissance writers who felt that black speech had been exploited and ridiculed by mainstream theater and literature.

As a result, many were reluctant to try to realistically depict African-American speech patterns, and they saw in Hurston's use of dialect a degrading picture of rural blacks.

As a result of such criticisms, Their Eyes Were Watching God soon disappeared from print. However, in the late 1960s, when interest in African-American and women's studies began to take hold, a number of African-American women across the country rediscovered the book and made it an underground sensation. Photocopies of the novel circulated at conferences, and Alice Walker's essay "Looking for Zora," published in Ms. magazine in 1975, galvanized efforts to get the novel back into print. Since 1978, it has been widely available, and the scholarly interest in it has been intense. In fact, previous judgments against the novel have been overturned by a number of respectable critics who have helped establish Their Eyes Were Watching God as a classic of African-

American literature and helped procure it a prominent position in the American literary canon.

Most significantly, recent critics have recognized a celebration of black culture in the novel that belies any notion that Hurston is pandering to a white audience. As Cheryl Wall explains, in her article "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," she asserted that black people, while living in a racist society that denied their humanity, had created an "alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings."

And, she argues, by invoking this culture, Hurston shows us that black men and women "attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it." One way that Hurston embraced the culture of rural, southern blacks, was to depict its folklore and language in a way that relished its creativity. Contemporary critics praise her for this above all else, for in her search for a suitable language for African-American literature, she initiated an effort to free black language from domination by the white culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains the significance of this act: "For Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self." In this way, critics have been able to show that Hurston, far from ignoring the serious social issues of her day, was engaged in a serious project of resuscitating a language and culture that was in danger of being corrupted by racist oppression. In fact, Gay Wilentz argues, in Faith of a (Woman) Writer, that the novel is one of "resistance" because it portrays "the pressure of the dominant culture on the thoughts and actions of the all-black community of Eatonville as well as blacks as a whole." In other words, although she largely ignored the overt racism that critics of the Harlem Renaissance wanted her to address, she explored the more subtle and perhaps more dangerous kind of racism that infects the black culture and makes it despise itself.

The racial pride that Hurston preached, then, was as radical a statement as any of the Harlem Renaissance, contemporary critics argue.

# Author Biography

Zora Neale Hurston's colorful life was a strange mixture of acclaim and censure, success and poverty, pride and shame. But her varied life, insatiable curiosity, and profound wit made her one of the most fascinating writers America has known. Even her date of birth remains a mystery. She claimed in her autobiography to have been born on 7 January 1903, but family members swore she was born anywhere from 1891 to 1902. Nevertheless, it is known that she was born in Eatonville, Florida, which was to become the setting for most of her fiction and was the first all-black incorporated town in the nation. Growing up there, where her father was mayor, Hurston was largely sheltered from the racial prejudice African-Americans experienced elsewhere in America.

At the age of fourteen, Hurston struck out on her own, working as a maid for white families, and was sent to Morgan Academy in Baltimore by one of her employers. Her educational opportunities continued to grow. She studied at Barnard College, where she worked under the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas. She also attended Howard University, and Columbia University, where she began work towards a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Hurston published her first story in 1921 and quickly gained recognition among the writers of the newly formed Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of artistic innovation in the African-American community of Harlem. She moved there in 1925 with little money but much ambition, and became well known as the most colorful member of the artistic and literary circles of the city. She also gained the attention of Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron who agreed to fund Hurston's trips to Florida where she gathered folklore. Although she married Herbert Sheen during this period, they lived together only eight months before her career came between them. While they split amicably, a later marriage to Albert Price III, which lasted from 1939 to 1943, ended bitterly.

Hurston's career as a novelist picked up in the 1930s. Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* appeared in 1934 and became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The following year, she published *Mules and Men,* a collection of folktales that mixed anthropology and fiction. This book gained her widespread recognition and helped her win a Guggenheim fellowship to study folklore in the West Indies. Before leaving for Haiti, she fell in love with a younger man. When he demanded that she give up her career, she ended the affair, but wrote the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks, translating their romance into the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake. The novel appeared in 1937 to some recognition and controversy, but it quickly receded from the limelight and was not a commercial success.

Although she published two more novels, another book of folklore, and dozens of stories, Hurston's literary reputation dwindled throughout the 1940s and '50s. In 1948 she was charged with committing an immoral act with a ten-year-old boy and was later absolved of the crime, but the damage to her public reputation had been done. Hurston felt that she was forever outcast from the African-American literary community of

Harlem, so she spent the rest of her life in Florida, where she worked various jobs and tried to keep her head above water financially. When she suffered a stroke in 1959, she was committed to a welfare home where she died penniless and alone in 1960. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the segregated cemetery of Fort Pierce. The location remained unknown until 1973, when it was located by author Alice Walker.

# About the Author

Zora Neale Hurston's colorful life was a strange mixture of acclaim and censure, success and poverty, pride and shame.

However, her varied life, insatiable curiosity, and profound wit made her one of the most fascinating writers America has known.

Even her date of birth remains a mystery.

She claimed in her autobiography to have been born on 7 January 1903, but family members swore she was born anywhere from 1891 to 1902. What is known for certain is that she was born in Eatonville, Florida, which was to become the setting for most of her fiction and was the first allblack incorporated town in the nation. Growing up there, where her father was mayor, Hurston was largely sheltered from the racial prejudice African Americans experienced elsewhere in America.

At the age of fourteen, Hurston struck out on her own, working as a maid for white families, and was sent to Morgan Academy in Baltimore by one of her employers. Her educational opportunities continued to grow, and she studied at Barnard College, where she worked under the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas, at Howard University, and at Columbia University, where she began work towards a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Hurston published her first story in 1921 and quickly gained recognition among the writers of the newly forming Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of artistic innovation in the African-American community of Harlem. She moved there in 1925 with little money but much ambition, and she became well-known as the most colorful member of the artistic and literary circles of the city.

She also gained the attention of Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron who agreed to fund Hurston's trips to Florida where she gathered folklore. Although she married Herbert Sheen during this period, they lived together only eight months before her career came between them. They split amicably, although a later marriage to Albert Price III, which lasted from 1939 to 1943, ended much more bitterly.

Hurston's career as a novelist gained momentum in the 1930s. Her first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine appeared in 1934 and became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The following year, she published Mules and Men, a collection of folktales that mixed anthropology and fiction. This book gained widespread recognition and helped her win a Guggenheim fellowship to study folklore in the West Indies. Before leaving for Haiti, though, she fell in love with a younger man.

When he demanded that she give up her career, she ended the affair, but wrote the novel Their Eyes Were Watching God in seven weeks, translating their romance into the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake.

The novel appeared in 1937 to some recognition and controversy, but it quickly receded from the limelight and was not a commercial success.

Although she published two more novels, another book of folklore, and dozens of stories, Hurston's literary reputation dwindled throughout the 1940s and '50s. In 1948 she was charged with committing an immoral act with a ten-year-old boy and was later absolved of the crime, but the damage to her public reputation had been done.

Hurston felt that she was forever outcast from the African-American literary community of Harlem, so she spent the rest of her life in Florida, where she worked various jobs and earned a meager living. When she suffered a stroke in 1959, she was committed to a welfare home where she died penniless and alone in 1960. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the segregated cemetery of Fort Pierce. In 1973, the writer Alice Walker visited the site of what she guessed to be Hurston's grave, and marked it with a tombstone inscribed "Zora Neale Hurston, A Genius of the South."

# Plot Summary

## Chapter 1

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* opens with a lyrical passage in which Janie Starks returns to her previous home, Eatonville.

The other townspeople observe her in judgment and speculate about what has brought her back. Through their dialogue, the characters of Pheoby, Janie's best friend, and Tea Cake, the young man she left with, are introduced. Eventually, Pheoby visits Janie, who tells her that Tea Cake is "gone." The rest of the novel will consist of the story Janie tells Pheoby about what has happened to her.

## Chapters 2 through 4

Janie summarizes her childhood, when she lived W1th her maternal grandmother, Nanny, who also cared for several white children. At one point, a photographer takes a picture of all of the children. While examining the photograph, Janie realizes that she is black; until then she had thought she was like all of the white children. One spring afternoon years later, Janie is daydreaming under a pear tree when Johnny Taylor appears and kisses her. Nanny observes this and decides that Janie ought to get married soon. She has decided on Brother Logan Killicks as Janie's future husband; he is apparently a responsible man, but Janie does not find him attractive and cannot imagine loving him. But Janie and Logan are married, and shortly thereafter Nanny dies.

Sometime later, Logan decides that Janie should perform more manual labor and leaves to buy a mule so that Janie can help him with the plowing. While he is gone, another man appears, a stranger to the area who identifies himself as Joe Starks. He is on his way to a town populated entirely by black people, where he has large ambitions for himself. Although Joe invites Janie to accompany him, she hesitates because she imagines how her grandmother would disapprove. When Janie threatens to leave Logan, he scorns her background. The next morning she meets Joe Starks, and they travel to Green Cove Springs where they are married.

## Chapters 5 through 9

Joe and Janie arrive in Eatonville, where Joe immediately asks to speak to the mayor and is informed that the town does not have one. Impressing the others, Joe pays cash for two hundred acres of land and begins advertising for additional people to move to Eatonville. After opening a store, Joe is soon appointed Mayor, but discord comes when he prevents Janie from making a speech some of the men have requested. Joe and Janie begin to grow apart emotionally.

Many of the men enjoy sitting on the store's porch and telling exaggerated stories. Although Janie longs to join in, Joe believes such activities and company are too low-class for her. Another man, Matt Bonner, owns a mule that he is working nearly to death. When Janie expresses dismay over the abuse of this mule, Joe forces Matt to sell the mule for five dollars. After the mule dies, Joe again forbids Janie to participate in the mock funeral with the rest of the town.

The tension between Joe and Janie continues to intensify, unti1 one day Joe slaps her because his supper has been poorly cooked. Janie's image of Joe is destroyed at this moment, and although she appears to continue to be obedient, she begins separating her inner and outer lives. Then one day when Janie fails to cut a plug of tobacco properly, Joe humiliates her in front of the others, commenting on aspects of her body. This time Janie replies, ridiculing Joe for his own lack of masculinity in front of the other men. Joe is so angry that he can respond only by hitting her.

Joe subsequently becomes ill and believes Janie has cast a spell on him. Janie sends for a doctor, who reveals that Joe's condition is fatal. Although Janie attempts to have a final conversation with him, Joe refuses to listen and dies fighting death. His funeral1s large and formal.

## Chapters 10 through 13

After several months, another stranger appears. His name is Vergible Woods, but his nickname is Tea Cake. He teaches Janie to play checkers, and for the first time she feels that someone is truly treating her as an individual. They do many unconventional activities together, such as fishing at midnight, and Janie begins to fall in love with him. She hesitates to trust him, though, because she is several years older than he is and because, as Joe's heir, she is a comparatively wealthy woman. Janie decides to sell the store so that she can begin a new life with Tea Cake. He sends for her from Jacksonville, and she leaves on an early morning train. They get married immediately.

Janie has hidden two hundred dollars in a purse inside her clothes, but when she wakes up the next morning, Tea Cake is gone and so 1S the money. After another day, he returns with only twelve dollars; he had thrown a party but promises to win the money back gambling. When he does, Janie decides to trust him and tells him about additional money she has saved. Tea Cake suggests that they go down to the Everglades to work.

## Chapters 14 through 17

Tea Cake teaches Janie to shoot, and she becomes quite skilled. Working in the Everglades is fun for both of them; they throw parties, and Janie participates in the playful atmosphere. Janie becomes Jealous of another woman who is flirting with Tea Cake, but he assures Janie that she has nothing to worry about. They decide to stay in the Everglades during the off season. Another woman, Mrs. Turner, cultivates a friendship with Janie, hoping that she will leave Tea Cake and marry Mrs. Turner's brother. Mrs. Turner feels disdainful of other black people, especially if their complexion

is particularly dark. At this point, Tea Cake becomes jealous and beats Janie in order to demonstrate to the Turners that he is boss in his household.

## Chapters 18 through 20

A hurricane threatens the Everglades, and many of the residents leave, but Janie and Tea Cake decide to ride the storm out. When the storm becomes fierce, they sit in their cabin, appearing "to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." When the hurricane threatens to flood their house, they leave, attempting to walk toward Palm Beach. When Janie is nearly attacked by a dog, Tea Cake rescues her, but he is bitten. The wound appears superficial and begins to heal.

The dog stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. The dog raced down the back-bone of the cow to the attack and Janie screamed and slipped far back on the tail of the cow, Just out of reach of the dog's angry Jaws. He wanted to plunge in after her but dreaded the water, somehow Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow's rump and seized the dog by the neck. But he was a powerful dog and Tea Cake was overtired. So he didn't kill the dog with one stroke as he had intended. But the dog couldn't free himself either They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone once Then Tea Cake finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there. The cow relieved of a great weight was landing on the fill with Janie before Tea Cake stroked in and crawled weakly upon the fill again.

After the hurricane, black men are forced to act as grave diggers, but they must be careful to separate the white corpses from the black ones, because the white bodies will be placed in coffins while the black ones will be buried in a mass grave. After one day, Tea Cake decides they should return to the Everglades.

Three weeks later, Tea Cake falls ill. He has a headache and is unable to eat or drink. The doctor reveals that he has rabies and will likely die He is concerned that Tea Cake will attack Janie and perhaps bite her also. Janie realizes that Tea Cake is becoming insane as his Illness progresses. He eventually tries to shoot Janie, who shoots and kills him.

Janie must be tried for murder, but she is acquitted; the jury finds that she acted in self-defense. Janie provides an elaborate funeral for Tea Cake in Palm Beach The novel concludes with a return to the conversation between Janie and Pheoby after Janie has returned to the house she lived in with Joe.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

As the book opens, forty-something Janie Crawford comes home to her small Florida town, having left a year and a half earlier with Tea Cake, a man at least ten years her junior. The gossip of those who hang out on Phoeby Watson's porch at dusk speculate that Tea Cake took all Janie's money and ran off with a younger girl. However, they are clearly jealous of pretty Janie, who, with her overalls and long rope of braided hair, carries herself as if she is much younger than she is. Janie passes them up and disappears through the gate of her own house.

Finally, Phoeby gets up and goes to take her a bowl of mulatto rice. On Janie's back porch, Janie tells Phoeby that Tea Cake is gone. She agrees to tell Phoeby the whole story, saying Phoeby can tell the others whatever she wants: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothing,' Phoeby. ' Tain't worth the trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf."

## Chapter 1 Analysis

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was initially met with widespread criticism for its departure from the more traditional African-American protest literature and for a stereotypical portrayal of ignorant, but carefree, African-American characters. Hurston's use of colloquial speech may have added to that perception, though the rich and real language gives the story both its beauty and its powerful believability. The dialogue, which attempts to capture the oral flavor of dialect rather than relying on traditional written English, reflects human voices to the point that it is impossible not to believe these characters exist, or to become immersed in their lives.

Despite its poor reception by African-American reviewers, the book developed a large following among women, who immediately recognized its protagonist, Janie Crawford, as a strong, independent woman quietly searching for her own identity. Caught between society's traditional expectations and her own desires, Janie's story is one of self-realization and self-fulfillment, which she ultimately achieves through a love based on equality.

The story is told using a *frame*—a story in which the main story happens in the past and is introduced and concluded by chapters set in the present. Chapter 1 sets up the frame, introducing Janie, the protagonist, as she mysteriously returns home after a long absence. Janie will tell the main story to her best friend, Phoeby Watson, as she explains what happened not only during her absence, but also during the years that led to her decision to leave town.

A frame serves two purposes in a story. The first is to introduce an element of suspense, by making readers curious about the references to the past. In the first chapter, we learn

that Janie left town a year and a half earlier with Tea Cake; a younger man who the townspeople were certain would betray her. The fact that she is returning alone with nothing but the overalls on her back causes immediate speculation, not only among the wagging tongues on the porches, but also for the reader: The reader questions whether Janie was betrayed and as to what happened to Tea Cake. Janie only tells her friend Phoeby, "Tea Cake is gone," a neutral statement that makes it impossible to tell whether the end of the relationship is a good or bad.

It also introduces a powerful conflict between Janie and the rest of the town, who "made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs." We immediately perceive by their hateful criticism and their negative, self-righteous assumptions that the members of the town are jealous of Janie, who acts and appears younger than her age. While the men focus on her beauty, the women take note of her muddy overalls as hopeful proof "that she might fall to [their] level some day." We do not yet know why this conflict exists, but Janie's physical appearance is deliberately at odds with what the town expects of a forty-something woman. The townspeople hope to that Janie has returned a broken woman: "She sits high, but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys." The fact that Janie passes up the gossips without more than a pleasant greeting implies that, in fact, she does consider herself above them—and their expectations.

The primary purpose of a frame story, however, is to provide some distance between the narrator and the events of the past. As time passes after an event, we tend to gain perspective of it, so that when we tell the story later, we can help the audience—and ourselves—make better sense of what happened. Early in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie begins to narrate her story to Phoeby, starting with her childhood, from the perspective of the much older, wiser woman she is now. Although the novel is told using an omniscient third-person narrator—one who sees and knows everything, including the thoughts of all the other characters—this story is Janie's, and relies on Janie's feelings and observations for its thematic and emotional power. Janie's story is "full of that oldest human longing—self revelation," and this statement, articulated in the first chapter as Janie's purpose for telling her story, forms the central theme of the book.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Janie explains to Phoeby that she never knew her father and hardly ever saw her mother. Raised by her grandmother in West Florida, Janie did not even know she was black until she was six. Her grandmother, whom everybody called Nanny, worked for a white family named the Washburns and lived behind their house. Janie played with the Washburn children and wore their cast-off clothes, and because of that, the other black children picked on her. They liked to crush her with stories of what her father did to her mother, about the sheriff and his bloodhounds chasing after him for it. Worried about her, Nanny managed to get a small house of her own, so they would not have to live in the white people's back yard.

Janie thinks back to the blossoming of the pear trees, and her first thoughts of love and marriage:

"She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage!"

At sixteen, Janie longed to be one of those trees in bloom, "with kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world!" Her story begins here, when out of curiosity she lets trashy Johnny Taylor kiss her over the fence post. Unfortunately, her grandmother sees them and decides it is time for Janie to marry. She tells Janie that Brother Logan Killicks, who has sixty acres and respectability, has been asking for her, but just the thought of old Logan Killicks desecrates Janie's sweet spring fantasies. When she begs Nanny not to make her marry him, Nanny tells her it is not Logan Killicks she wants Janie to have, but protection.

Nanny says black people are like branches without roots, and that makes things happen in queer ways. Nanny was a slave on a Georgia plantation and gave birth to the owner's daughter just before he rode off to fight near the end of the Civil War. Threatened by his jealous wife, Nanny took the baby, Leafy, and hid in the woods until she heard that the war was over and that the slaves were free. She wanted her daughter to be a teacher and put her in school as soon as one was available, but then Leafy was raped by the schoolteacher and never was the same. She went wild and took to drinking and staying out all night, and even after Janie was born, she was gone more often than not. Nanny did the best she could to raise Janie, but she was an old woman by that time. Even though God answered her prayers and let her live to see Janie grow up, she will not live much longer, and she wants to make sure Janie has someone to care for her when she is gone.

# Chapter 2 Analysis

Early on, Janie is perceived by her peers as someone who thinks she is better than others are. Dressed in white people's clothes and playing with white children, Janie herself does not even realize she is different from the Washburn children until she is six, when she sees herself in a photograph. Jealous and trying to beat her down to their level, the other black children remind her that she is the product of rape, effectively "dirtying" her. At the time, they succeeded, though now an older, wiser Janie realizes what they were doing, saying, "Dey made it sound real bad so as tuh crumple mah feathers." In placing her childhood into perspective, Janie rebels against the other children's meanness, just as she now rebels against the meanness of the town.

At sixteen, Janie experiences sexual awakening, symbolized by the pollination of the blooms on the pear tree. Throughout the book, Janie associates herself with nature rather than people, who try to control her and often let her down, and the bloom and the bee will become powerful symbols for the kind of love Janie seeks throughout her life. However, her innocence worries her grandmother, whose life as a slave has taught her that protection from abuse is the best a black woman can expect from life. For idealistic Janie, this is not enough, but she is too young and uncertain to defy her grandmother's wishes, especially after the horrifying story Nanny tells her about her mother's rape.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Assured by the old folks that love will come with marriage, Janie marries Logan Killicks on a Saturday in Nanny's parlor. Two months later, she comes back to visit Nanny, complaining that even though her husband is not mean or abusive, she does not love him. He is ugly and his feet stink, and Janie wants beauty and love. Nanny tells her not to be so foolish, because Janie has the money and respect about which most black women only dream. She says love is the "very prong all us black women gits hung on" and tells Janie to give it some time.

A month later, Nanny is dead. Though Janie waits through the seasons, nothing changes. She cannot help but dream of the beauty she first saw in the blooming pear tree, and when that first dream dies, she becomes a woman.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Janie's true womanhood is marked not by her marriage but by the realization that marriage does not necessarily mean love. Her intangible wishes for romantic love contrast with Nanny's cynical expectations—that love is more often destructive than not and money and respect form the pinnacle of a successful life. In fact, this measurement of success by material gain (in the form of Logan Killicks' sixty acres) is what Janie will fight throughout the book. Even though in her grandmother's (and society's) eyes Janie has everything she could possibly want, Janie perceives her own life as dull and bleak, and she feels trapped by both her loveless marriage and her grandmother's wishes.

Her grandmother's death ultimately frees Janie from the prospect of disappointing her, but it is too late to extricate herself from her marriage. Despite her feelings, Janie's inexperience and her sense of honor and duty prompt her to follow her grandmother's advice, wait and do the best she can to make the marriage succeed.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Long before the end of the first year, Logan stops sweet-talking Janie, who refuses to help him with the farm chores. She does her job in the kitchen and figures that is enough, but Logan accuses her of being spoiled—by her grandmother and by himself. One day, he leaves to buy a mule she can use to plow the fields and, cutting potatoes in the front yard, Janie encounters Joe "Jody" Starks; a stylish, well-dressed black man on his way from Georgia to a town in Florida he heard is being built by blacks. Jody is a man with his eye on the horizon. Having saved his money for thirty years, he says he has finally found the opportunity to be a voice in the black community. Immediately attracted to Janie, Joe sticks around for a couple of weeks, telling her finally that he wants to marry her. He says if she runs off with him, she will never have to do any work—he will treat her like the queen she deserves to be.

Mulling it over, Janie asks Logan what he would do if she left him. Hurt, Logan says he did her a favor by marrying her, given her origins, and if she listens to the lies of some scoundrel, she will soon find out the reality and come running back to him. The next morning, Logan demands Janie help him move the manure pile in the barn, but she refuses. He accuses her again of thinking she is better than she really is, as good as white people even. Then he says he ought to take the ax and kill her, but he damns her instead. Janie goes back in the house, thinks it over for a minute and then goes to meet Joe Starks, who is waiting with a hired wagon. Before sundown, they are married.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Janie quickly begins to perceive herself more as a mule than as a wife to Logan, who resents the fact that Janie is not more appreciative of his willingness to marry her. Joe Starks, with his eye on the "far horizon" presents Janie with an opportunity to leave the drudgery of her marriage. Although she does not see Joe as "sun-up and pollen," he does represent "change and chance," and when he asks her to run away with him, Janie takes a chance, hoping the change will lead to the fulfillment of her dreams.

Before she makes her decision, though, she gives Logan the opportunity to convince her why she should not. Young and still caught between the traditional expectations for a black woman and a wife, Janie feels both a certain loyalty toward Logan and a respect for the institution of marriage. However, Logan, hurt that Janie would even think of leaving him, throws her origins in her face, using the same tactics the children had used to belittle and scare her into staying. His bullying has the opposite effect—Janie rebels against the notion that Logan is better than she is, and that she deserves any less than what she wants. She is not convinced that Joe Starks is the fulfillment of her dreams, but Janie decides that any change will do her some good. This is one of the turning points of the novel, in which Janie exerts her independence, rebelling against masculine

authority and societal expectations by running off and marrying another man without bothering to divorce her current husband. Janie's courage and inner strength are the two characteristics that define her and that have endeared her to so many readers.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Jody and Janie are surprised to find that Eatonville, the black town near Maitland, is nothing but a little hole on a hundred acres with no mayor and nothing but a few rough houses in the sand. Jody complains it is just as he thought—a lot of talk and nothing being done. He quickly rents a house and buys two hundred more acres from Mr. Eaton, the man in Maitland who donated the first hundred. Then he rallies the men of the town, buying lumber and charging them to build roads. He hires two to build him a store, which he fills with goods and uses to hold town meetings, and soon the men unanimously elect him to be mayor. He adds a post office to the store and buys a street lamp to drive away the dark, inviting people from all over the county to a town barbecue celebrating the first lighting. Soon, families move in and buy Jody's land, and Jody is able to build a nice two-story house filled with fine things like a flowered spittoon for Janie. He buys a gold one for himself, which he keeps on his store-bought desk in the post office.

Busy with his mayoral duties, Jody leaves Janie in charge of the store. However, he will not allow her to make speeches when the others ask, and he keeps a kerchief on her pretty, long hair. Janie does not like not having a choice about things, and often feels like she is doing nothing but passing the time. She finds that sleeping with authority keeps her removed from everyone else, while many in the town begin to resent the way Jody lords over them all. While some people believe Jody has earned what he has, most start feeling like he built the town on the backs of everyone else, showing little charity for those unable or unwilling to work as hard. That he dresses and acts as a white man disconcerts those who cannot help but feel like he is as much a master to them as the white man was.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Although Janie does not see Jody Starks as the fulfillment of her youthful romantic fantasies, she commits to him once she marries him, taking his dreams as her own. However, the more successful Jody becomes, the more Janie seems to disappear from his life. Jody is a powerful presence whose voice and corroborating actions dominate the chapter as they do Janie and the town. Forbidden from voicing her own thoughts in public, Janie finds that her role as Mrs. Mayor Starks keeps her removed from the rest of the town. Rather than experiencing all that life has to offer, as she had hoped to do, Janie finds that she has traded one form of drudgery for another.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The store becomes the center of town, where the men sit on the porch, rib each other and vie for the women's attention. For Janie, it is like watching a play, and it takes the monotony out of the six days a week tending the store. The physical work is not always hard, but the complex calculations are, and she tends to get distracted, which irritates Jody. He also does not like her taking part in the trashy scenes on the porch, though he is not above joining them himself. For instance, one of the favorite jokes revolves around Matt Bonner's yellow mule, an ornery, half-starved creature that runs off as often as he can. Janie starts to feel sorry for the poor thing, and stalks off one day, muttering that they ought to be ashamed of themselves, with how the thing's been worked to death and mistreated, and now they have to finish him off with their "devilin'." Jody overhears her and buys the mule for five dollars so he can rest, making a speech to the same effect. Janie voices what the others are thinking: "'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negoes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something."

The others comment that Janie is a born orator, but Jody never says a word. In fact, he is jealous of Janie and jealous over her. He sees the way the other men look at her and fantasizes about killing them. Instead, he makes her tie up her hair, telling her she is just for him to look at. As much as Janie hates it, she keeps her feelings to herself in an effort to keep the peace.

The mule becomes a kind of town mascot, and when it finally dies, the town decides to drag it out to the swamp for a ceremony. Jody refuses to let Janie go; telling her such a scene is beneath the Mayor's wife. He says the ceremony is to humor the others, who are mainly trashy and lazy, wanting nothing more than a full belly and a place to sleep.

Therefore, it goes on this way, with Jody alternately building up Janie's pedestal and knocking her off it. When he cannot find a bill of lading in the store, he accuses her of not putting it where he told her to, with Janie responding that he sure loves to tell her what to do, but she cannot tell him anything. Jody says she needs telling—all women need telling, just like children and chickens and cows. After seven years, the spirit of the marriage has begun to die, and when the breakfast Janie cooks is accidentally scorched, Jody slaps her face.

It is just after this slap when Mrs. Tony Robbins comes to the store to beg Jody for food. Her husband buys food three times a week, but she claims she and her children never see it. As usual, Mayor Starks cuts her a small piece of meat, despite her carrying on that it is too small, and sends her on her way after adding the meat to Tony's account.

Convinced she is just trying to humiliate her husband, the men on the porch claim they would kill a wife for carrying on the way she does. However, Joe Lindsay says Tony will not beat her, since beating women is like stepping on baby chickens. Hearing this, Janie cannot stop herself from stepping in: "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens."

## Chapter 6 Analysis

On the surface, Janie's role as "Mrs. Mayor Starks" contrasts sharply with her role as Logan Killicks' wife; once a "mule," she's now an "adornment"—a pretty object to be admired and whose appearance serves no purpose other than to reflect the success of her husband. However, dictating her appearance and forbidding her from taking part in the fun and frivolity around her, Joe Starks exerts as much control over Janie's life as Logan Killicks had, if not more. The only difference is that now Janie has an entire town's expectations to meet. We now understand why the people of Eatonville seemed to hold Janie to a high standard when she returned—her appearance in muddy overalls contradicted the expectations her husband had established for her.

As the wife of Eatonville's mayor-the man who virtually built the town- Janie has both money and power, just as her grandmother would have wanted. However, this chapter makes it clear that Janie's power is an illusion. Although she reveals herself a "born orator," her words do not amount to much, as she will comment at the end of the book. Rather, Joe uses every opportunity to belittle her, perhaps afraid of the inner strength she possesses. "Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it." As a result, Janie learns to keep quiet, squashing her own inner voice.

However, she is too independent to squash it entirely, and her words, when she chooses to use them, demonstrate a subtle power. She shames Joe into buying Matt Bonner's poor mule, after which he promptly takes the credit for her compassion. However, Janie, in a speech that on the surface seems to strengthen Jody's power, points out that it is only power Jody is interested in. Through this and her later speech to the men about their abuse of women, whom they liken to chickens, Janie reveals herself as a moral force against the town. The reader's realization of this at the end of the chapter offsets the bleakness of Janie's own realization that she is again trapped in an empty marriage that demands she accept the material dreams of her husband in the place of her own emotional fulfillment.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

The years take away Janie's fight, and no matter what Jody does, she does not say anything. She thinks about running away but has nowhere to go. At thirty-five, she feels like "a rut in the road" with "plenty of life beneath the surface but…kept beaten down by the wheels." She sees the changes of age come over Jody, whose energy has left him. His eyes are now absent; his once-prosperous belly sags. Desperate to ignore his own aging, Jody focuses on hers, as if by insulting her and calling her an old woman, he will not look so bad next to her. Janie ignores it until one day in the store, when he crosses the line. Upbraiding her for not cutting a plug of tobacco on the mark, he tells her in front of all the others not to stand there rolling her pop eyes at him with her rump hanging to her knees.

It is like stripping a woman on a crowded street, and the others sense it. Janie rounds on him, telling Jody she may be nearly forty, but he is already fifty, and while she is every inch a woman, when Jody pulls down his britches he looks like the "change uh life." Robbed of his masculinity in front of the jeering men, Jody, realizing they will never respect him again, strikes Janie with all his might and runs her out of the store.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Nearly twenty years of verbal abuse have suppressed Janie's independence, though she recognizes that they have not entirely destroyed her self-determination. She views Jody's aging with a measure of pity until his desperate attempt to humiliate her forces her to fight back. Clinging to her self-esteem, Janie humiliates him with a pointed remark about his flagging masculinity, proving that her words can indeed be more effective than even Jody's powerful actions. This is because Jody, like the rest of the town, relies on his material worth to measure his success, but, once Janie strips him of his illusion of power, the town can separate the wealth from the man, admiring one while pitying the other. With no recourse left, Jody uses his fists. However, the reader senses that his brutality will be largely ineffective in reclaiming Janie and the town's respect.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

After the big fight, Jody moves his things into a downstairs bedroom. As he grows sicker, he consults a root-doctor, but Janie's best friend, Phoeby Watson, tells her a rumor was going around that the root-doctor told Jody that Janie must have "fixed" him. For that reason, he refuses all food from her. Janie does not really think he believes it, but he does it just to hurt her. Once he is confined to bed, people parade in and out of Janie's house to bring dishes and concern to Jody, taking no notice of Janie whatsoever. Desperate, she gets a doctor to come in from Orlando, but he tells her Jody should have been treated two years ago. His kidneys are shutting down now and nothing can be done for him.

Near the end, Janie presses herself on him, trying to make him listen. She says maybe she was not a great wife, but she had sympathy—he has just never given her a chance to use it. He is not the man she ran down the road to meet and keep house with; he never accepted her for who she was. Instead, he had to crowd out her own mind with his, and now he has to die to find out that he has to pacify someone else if he wants any love and sympathy. She tells him he never tried to pacify anybody but himself, because he was too busy listening to his own big voice.

Jody lashes at her disobedience, but the fury abruptly kills him. Looking down on his dead face, Janie feels pity for him. Jody might have been hard on the world, but the world was hard on him, too, and she wonders what happens "in the making of a voice out of a man." Then she goes to the mirror, where she lets down her hair and takes stock of herself. The glory is still there. She puts her hair back up and goesgoes to the window, where she cries to the people waiting outside that her husband is dead.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Jody's death is a powerful scene in which Janie finds her own voice again, the one Jody crowded out with his own. Even at the end, Jody refuses to recognize that he is dying, as if by exerting his will and blaming Janie he can control what is happening. However, Janie finally claims control, forcing Jody to listen when she tells him that he is dying; he has been too busy listening to himself to listen to anyone else. Here, Death is personified—given human characteristics—as a "strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West," a being who lives in a straight house with no roof, for "[w]hat need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him?" Hurston imbues Nature and natural forces with the real power, thus stripping all the power from those who rely on material things.

Many critics have commented that the men in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fail to change, unlike the women, who courageously journey toward self-discovery and

fulfillment. Jody is typical of the book's masculine characters—despite Janie's speech, Jody dies with the same fury and defiance that defined his treatment of her and the town. He fails to change, while his death finally offers Janie the opportunity of freedom, symbolized by the letting down of her hair. Before she can explore this new freedom, however, she must play the role of the grieving wife, and so she puts her hair back up.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Jody is buried with all the fine accessories the town expects, including Janie dressed in expensive black folds and a veil she describes as "a wall of stone and steel." With Joe's death comes glorious freedom and time for reflection. Janie thinks about going back to her old home to find her mother and tend her grandmother's grave, but she has no desire to do either. She realizes she hates her grandmother, who sold her off in the name of love: "Some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. However, Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her."

The only change Janie makes is the kerchiefs—she burns them and now wears her hair in a loose, swinging braid. Helped by Hezekiah, a seventeen-year-old imitation of Joe, she still tends the store; she is half-afraid Joe might walk in and find something wrong. Men from all over press Janie to let them take care of her and her affairs, speaking of respect rather than desire, but Janie, unwilling to lose her freedom, never lets any of them past the front porch.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Although Janie plays the part of the grieving widow, she does not feel the grief. Superficially, she does what she can to meet the town's expectations, but at a deeper level, she rebels, burning the kerchiefs that hid her hair, fishing with her friend Phoeby, and using Jody's recent death as an excuse to turn away all the suitors she knows can only disappoint her. The idea of trading one husband for another who wants to take care of her and manage her money is not a compelling one; Janie is too experienced now, and she rejects the notion for the last time that she must be cared for by a man, having found that such a comfort is not worth the mindless boredom.

Instead, Janie uses her new freedom to rediscover herself slowly. She also fights the lingering damage Jody caused to her self-esteem. His voice is still powerful inside her mind, and Janie continues to keep the store as if he is still there to reprimand her.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

One day, Janie is left alone in the store while most of the town goes to a ball game in Winter Park. A strange, imaginative young man wanders in, and they strike up a conversation. He tells her he got the place of the ball game mixed up and will have to wait for another ride to take him home. In the meantime, he offers to teach Janie how to play checkers, and then he laughs and protests when she cheats. Janie thinks here is someone who actually wants her to play—Jody had told her she did not have the brains for checkers and would not let her. After a while, the young man introduces himself as Vergible Woods, Tea Cake for short. Janie likes his sly grin, his lazy eyes and narrow waist. He sticks around while she closes up the store and walks her home on his arm, promising to come back for another game. For Janie, it feels like she has known him all her life.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Imaginative and fun-loving Tea Cake is an obvious contrast to the previous men in Janie's life. Contradicting the traditional expectations that have been imposed on her, Tea Cake not only teaches Janie to play checkers but also refuses to let her win. Thus, this initial scene establishes the relationship they will develop as one based on mutual respect and equality.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Janie decides that at twenty-five, Tea Cake is too young for her, and he is probably the kind of man who lives with various women, never willing to settle down. It does not look like he has much, and she makes up her mind to snub him. However, when he reappears at the store a week later, strumming an imaginary guitar, she melts despite all her intentions. Later that night, he convinces her to go on a midnight fishing trip with him, something so crazy Janie cannot help but like it. They cook the fish and stay up all night, and Janie smuggles him out the back door of the house so nobody sees.

All the same, Hezekiah warns Janie against him, saying she is too good for Tea Cake, who does not have a thing except a change of clothes and has no business making his self familiar with the likes of her. However, the next night, Tea Cake is waiting for her on the steps of her porch with a string of trout. They cook the fish, and then Tea Cake makes himself at home, playing blues on her piano and singing her to sleep. She wakes up to him combing her hair. He tells her how pretty she is, but Janie is still reserved. She reminds Tea Cake that she is almost forty, and what he is feeling is more about convenience than love. Upset, Tea Cake leaves.

The next day, Janie cannot stop thinking of him. Tea Cake reminds her of the blossoms on the pear tree when she was young, but she does not want to be foolish. Early the next morning, he wakes her just to tell her the daylight has not changed his mind. He scrambles off for his job in Orlando, but reappears on her porch that night. Pretending to be asleep in the hammock, he pulls her in when Janie approaches. After lying in his arms a while, Janie brings him inside for supper. Their laughter carries through the house all night, and in the morning, she awakens to Tea Cake kissing her breath away.

However, when he does not return the next night or the next, Janie is plagued by doubts. Then he shows up on the fourth day in a battered car, which he says he will use to take her shopping. He plans to take her to the big Sunday school picnic, and he wants to drive her to the best stores to buy supplies. Janie asks him if he is sure he wants to be seen with her, telling him if he wants to take someone else, it is all right with her. Tea Cake says he knows it would not be all right with her, but he would not have killed himself the last few days to make enough money to take her out if that was not what he wanted. He says no one on earth can hold a candle to her, and Janie has the keys to the kingdom.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Janie's doubts about Tea Cake reflect her earlier disappointments, as well as the considerable force of the town's expectations. Although Hezekiah cannot find anything bad to say about Tea Cake, he tells Janie the young man is not good enough for her.

The implication is that money is the only incentive a poor young man has to pursue an older, wealthy woman. In fact, this is probably the case among most of Janie's would-be suitors, and Janie is now too experienced and realistic not to face this possibility with Tea Cake. Although she readily associates Tea Cake with "a bee to a blossom," it takes all of Janie's courage to risk following her heart. However, the fact that Janie does follow her heart, despite all her rational intentions to the contrary, is probably the most significant turning point in the book. Experiencing true love for the first time, Janie will now gain or lose everything.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

The townspeople soon notice that Janie is spending all her time with Tea Cake, and it makes them mad. Janie has stopped attending church, and she wears blue like the young girls do, just because Tea Cake likes it. They think Joe Starks is probably rolling over in his grave.

One night, Sam Watson tells Phoeby, his wife , that she ought to have a talk with Janie. Although Phoeby tells her husband malice and jealousy have the others talking—since they all want Janie's money and property for themselves—she goes on over to Janie's house and tells her she is taking an awfully big chance on Tea Cake. Janie admits she is, but she plans to marry him. Everybody takes a chance on marriage, and she has been through it twice already. This time it is for love.

The first two times, she did it her grandmother's way, but her grandmother could not sit down when she felt like it and wanted nothing more for Janie than a porch to sit on like a white woman. She never stopped to think what Janie was supposed to do all day, and it nearly drove Janie crazy. She needs to spread out and experience the world and herself, and she plans to do it with Tea Cake, as soon as they can sell the store.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 affirms Janie's commitment to follow her heart and risk marrying Tea Cake, against the opposition of the town. If the marriage is a success, Janie's story becomes one of triumph and self-fulfillment; if it fails, the message is a warning against defying society's traditional expectations. Phoeby's warning functions as a means of giving Janie a final chance to change her mind, but Janie refuses, heightening the suspense: for Janie there is now no turning back.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Tea Cake's old boss in the railroad stops in Jacksonville promises him a job, so he sends for Janie, who takes the early train in a pretty blue dress, with only a few of the townspeople out yet to bear witness. At Phoeby's advice, she pins two hundred dollars inside her shirt and does not tell Tea Cake about it, just in case. Just off the train, she marries him, and they spend the night together in the room he has rented. The next morning, she sends him out to get some fish before she is ready to get up. A little while later, she rises, finding that the two hundred dollars is gone. Janie waits all day and all night, thinking of the ugly widow Annie Tyler, who took up with all kinds of young boys until she finally left town with Who Flung, a good-for-nothing who took all her money and left her after only two days.

Tea Cake returns at dawn strumming a real guitar. He spins a wild story about having found the two hundred dollars and deciding to see what it was like to be rich. He went out near the railroad shops and threw a party, got in a fight, left, and bought a guitar. Janie complains that she would have liked to have some fun, too, but Tea Cake admits he was worried she would leave him if he brought her around the low railroad workers. He had made up his mind before they were married that he would never let her see any commonness in him. Janie tells him if he ever leaves without her again, she will kill him.

Tea Cake agrees, and then says he might as well tell her that she married one of the best gamblers God ever made. He has twelve dollars left, and he plans to use it to win back her two hundred and then some. Janie figures that no matter what the hypocrites back home might think, Tea Cake is not hurting anyone and has a right to make some money if he wants. All day, he practices throwing dice and cutting cards, and on Saturday, he sets off for the game.

Again, Janie waits through the night. Finally, Tea Cake reappears, but he has been cut in the back with a razor blade. As Janie fixes him up, he tells her he won her money back, plus everything the others had, but one accused him of cheating and cut him. Tea Cake had his knife and defended himself. Seeing Janie's tears, he tells her it is the other guy's wife who ought to be crying, not her. He gives her the money he won—three hundred and twenty-two dollars—and tells her to put her two hundred back in her shirt. Janie decides then to tell her about the twelve hundred she has in the bank, but Tea Cake only tells her to add the two hundred to it—anything she needs, he will provide, and if he cannot provide it, she will not have it. Janie is fine with this. Tea Cake promises her that when he has healed, he is going to take her on a crazy adventure in the Everglades, and as he drifts off to sleep, she feels her soul finally crawling back out from hiding.

# Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter functions to test Janie, who, having risked everything to follow her heart, now finds Tea Cake gone with her two hundred dollars. The figure of Annie Tyler represents the worst-case scenario, and the very real possibility that Janie has made another mistake. Worse than losing her money is the prospect of having her dreams destroyed for the last time by the one man she truly loves. When Tea Cake reappears and then repays her money, Janie agrees to accept him as he is, regardless of what the "hypocrites" back home might think of his gambling. Tea Cake returns the favor by promising to include Janie in everything he does, thus elevating her permanently to the status of his equal. Certain now that she can trust Tea Cake, and believing that she has finally found someone with whom she can share all that life has to offer, Janie's soul begins to heal.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

In the Everglades, Tea Cake gets a job picking beans. Janie marvels at what Tea Cake calls "the muck"—the ten-feet-tall grass and the rich, black soil. Everything seems big and new. The season has not yet started, so Tea Cake buys some guns and teaches Janie how to shoot. She gets to be a better shot than Tea Cake, and she busies herself hunting and cooking and making a home. Eventually, the migrant workers pour in, people who live for nothing but the day and a good laugh. Tea Cake and Janie's house becomes the center of the fun, filled with good jokes, gambling and Tea Cake's music. Other nights are spent at the jukebox, dancing, singing, fighting, crying and laughing. After a while, Tea Cake asks Janie to come work with him in the fields, since he cannot stand to be away from her all day. Therefore, Janie dons some overalls and sets out to pick beans. This redeems her in the eyes of the other women, who until now thought she felt herself above them.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The Everglades presents an ideal setting compared to the restrictive settings of Janie's earlier life—Logan Killicks' sixty acres and Eatonville's rigid hierarchy. Here, Janie finds herself in the middle of a collective where everyone has the same job, the same amount of money and the same ambition—to have fun. She learns to shoot like a man and works with the others in the field, not because she is expected to, but because Tea Cake wants to spend time with her. Working in the field with Tea Cake differs from the work her previous husbands requested of her. Tea Cake seems to have a true respect and adoration for his wife, unlike the other two who only wanted to be able to control the woman they married. Ironically, this warms the other women to her, and for the first time, Janie does not feel the weight of other people's expectations.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

When a chunky young woman called Nunkie starts chasing after Tea Cake, Janie gets jealous, wondering if he will stop wanting her someday. Then she catches the two struggling in a cane field. Tea Cake tells her Nunkie took his working tickets, but Janie does not believe him. He follows her home, where he fends off her furious blows. Finally, Janie is convinced he has not been cheating. Tea Cake tells her, "You'se something tuh make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit to die."

## Chapter 15 Analysis

The brief conflict with Nunkie serves to reinforce the strength of Janie and Tea Cake's love. Janie again suffers doubts about her age and appeal, but Tea Cake reassures her, letting her hit him without fighting back. Jealousy will reemerge later in the novel, but this chapter offers the hope that love is stronger.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

The bean-picking season ends, but Janie and Tea Cake stay on, and Janie, with nothing better to do, starts making friends. She gets to know Mrs. Turner, whose husband owns one of the eateries. Mrs. Turner takes pride in her Caucasian characteristics, and idolizes Janie, who is even fairer than she is. However, Mrs. Turner despises Tea Cake, and every other black man and woman whom she feels laughs too loud and makes it impossible for white people to take him or her in. Because of their color, their features and their monkey climbing, Mrs. Turner says light-complexioned people cannot even make a separate race of their own. Instead, they have to be lumped in with all the blacks. Janie has never heard or thought such a thing, so she keeps quiet at Mrs. Turner's tirade, a little dismayed. However, Tea Cake overhears one day when Mrs. Turner tells Janie that her brother would make her a fine husband. Janie says she already has a husband, but even so, Tea Cake is infuriated. He tells Janie to give Mrs. Turner the cold shoulder from now on. Unfortunately, no matter how Janie treats the woman, Mrs. Turner forgives her, because she sees Janie as higher than herself—a kind of deity whose cruelty is expected simply because she is better than everyone else, Mrs. Turner included.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The character of Mrs. Turner represents an unwelcome intrusion of the hierarchy Janie left behind. Representing relative wealth and power in the mostly egalitarian community of the Everglades bean pickers, Mrs. Turner also relies on physical characteristics to define desirability. Again, Janie is perceived as someone "better than the rest," this time by virtue of her fair skin and long hair. Mrs. Turner tries to tempt Janie back to the traditional world of expectations and material and class acquisition, but Janie refuses, ironically confirming for Mrs. Turner than Janie is better than the others are.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Much of the old crowd returns for the new season, along with new people who arouse jealousies for both Tea Cake and Janie. Mrs. Turner brings her visiting brother to be introduced, which gives Tea Cake a brainstorm. He whips Janie to prove he is still in charge, not because of anything she has done, but because it reassures him of his own possession. The fact that she does not fight back, but still clings to him instead, makes the other men all the more jealous of Tea Cake, who admits he did it to show the Turners who was boss.

The others agree that Mrs. Turner needs to be taught a lesson, and after payday, everyone gets drunk and tears apart her eatery. Her weak husband does not interfere, and Mrs. Turner tells him she is taking her son and brother and going back to Miami. However, her son and brother have already been warned, and they are on their way to Palm Beach.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Tea Cake's whipping of Janie, while seemingly out of the context with the relationship that has been developed, is a deliberate ploy to use societal expectations against its representatives—specifically, Mrs. Turner. At the time *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written, it was not uncommon or unexpected for a husband to exert control over his wife using physical force. Until now, Tea Cake has not used any such force, and as a result, he is seen by the others to be weak. Because of the freedoms she enjoys in her relationship, Janie is seen to be relatively vulnerable to temptation. Tea Cake realizes that the only way to prove that their relationship is strong—and that Janie cannot be taken from him—is to whip her. The fact that Janie's silence implies agreement reinforces for the other characters that their love is strong. It could be surmised that Janie, for the first time, is a willing participant in her own abuse, thus eliminating the abuse.

Tea Cake finishes the problem with Mrs. Turner by turning the others against her. In a collective show of power, they destroy her eatery—the thing that defined her status. Stripped of her power, she, along with her son and brother, are driven from town.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Janie is home one day when bands of Seminoles start moving past, followed by fleeing animals. One of the Seminoles tells her a hurricane is coming. Soon, many of the workers decide to leave for Palm Beach, but Tea Cake and Janie, along with some of their friends, decide to stay. Tea Cake is sure the weather will clear, and he does not want to lose a day of work. Soon, though, it becomes clear they should have left. They huddle inside the house with their friend Motor Boat, listening to the battering wind and the thunder, waiting for daylight that does not come. Tea Cake asks Janie if she is mad at him for bringing her to the 'Glades, but she tells him no—many people never see light at all, but she was fumbling around in the dark and God opened the door. Whatever is going to happen now will happen. Therefore, they sit in the shanty, "their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."

When the water starts to reach the house, Tea Cake decides they have to go. They bundle up their money and push their way through the wind and water, staggering with so many other terrified people. Dead things seem alive and things once living are now dead, and the long struggle drains their energy. They reach a two-story house, where they take refuge for a while with their friend Motor, but when the lake starts coming, they leave. Motor refuses to go and, reluctantly, they leave him behind. In high water, Tea Cake carries Janie, who cannot swim more than a few strokes, and by the time they reach the bridge at Six Mile Bend, Tea Cake is exhausted. However, the bridge is filled with white people, and there is hardly any spot to take refuge. After many more miles, Tea Cake collapses along the side of the road. Janie stretches out over him, trying to shield him from the wind and rain. She spots a long piece of tarpaper flying in the wind and tries to catch it, but it catches her, sailing her up over the water. She screams and lets go, plummeting down.

Tea Cake hears her scream and dives in after her. He spots a cow struggling through the water with a dog on its back, and he calls to Janie to take hold of the cow's tail. However, when she does, the dog tries to attack her. His knife in hand, Tea Cake reaches it just in time, but he is so weak and the dog is so furious, Tea Cake is not able to take it out with one cut. The dog bites his cheek, but Tea Cake finally gains the upper hand and kills it, sending it down to the bottom of the lake. Dragged out of the water by the cow, Janie fusses over Tea Cake when he joins her, but he refuses a doctor, even if she could find one in all this mess. They struggle on toward Palm Beach, which they reach the next day. The city is devastated, and it takes a good deal of their money to find a place to sleep. Tea Cake tells Janie he reckons she never expected all this when she took up with him, and she tells him she never expected anything at all, but he came along and made something out of her, so she is grateful for anything they come through together.

# Chapter 18 Analysis

Again, Hurston uses Nature to strip the characters of the feeble power of material possessions and elevate the power of love. Confronted by the awesome strength of the hurricane, people find themselves vying for safety with fleeing animals. Houses in the quarters and big houses alike are flooded and blown away, proving that no possession makes a man as mighty as God. Tea Cake, making the mistake of worrying about lost pay, refuses to leave, and so he and Janie are trapped in the storm. When he realizes his error, Janie reassures him that now that she has seen the "light" of love, the darkness (or death) does not matter.

Their struggle through the storm to higher ground tests their love, which proves stronger than the force of the storm when Tea Cake, despite his exhaustion, carries Janie through the water and then dives back in to save her from the dog. At the end of the chapter, when Janie reiterates that she is grateful for anything she and Tea Cake get through together, the reader believes it. All doubts that their relationship will succeed are gone, and each day hereafter will be for them a precious gift. Unfortunately, the "pure hate" Janie saw in the dog's eyes foreshadows the tragic outcome.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Once he has rested, Tea Cake decides to go out and look around, but as soon as he does, some white men with guns press him into burial service. He spends half a day burying the truckloads of dead, told to keep the blacks and whites separate, as money had been found to build the whites coffins. Desperate over Janie worrying about him, he manages to escape when another truck comes. Back at the room, Janie is relieved to see him, and says they ought to stay inside. However, Tea Cake is afraid they will just come searching for him, or for someone else to bury the dead, and he wants to go back to the 'Glades, where he at least has friends.

There, he finds his friends, including Motor, who was blown away in the house, but slept through the whole thing, and they find work clearing away the wreckage and building the dike. However, a few weeks later, Tea Cake comes home with a headache, and then rapidly grows sicker. He has nightmares of being choked, and he is unable to drink water. Janie gets the white doctor to come, but when he hears about the dog bite, he realizes what the illness is. Outside, he tells Janie to stay away from Tea Cake when he has his fits. The rabies has most likely progressed beyond treatment, though he will wire Miami for some of the serum.

Janie is crushed at the thought of losing Tea Cake, but he becomes increasingly irrational. Overcome by jealousy, he demands to know where she goes and whom she is seeing. When he goes to the outhouse, she discovers a loaded pistol beneath his pillow. Out of desperation, she reloads it so the first three chambers are empty. Then she puts it back, hoping he will not notice.

She also puts the rifle behind the stove, within easy reach. She can see the mad dog in Tea Cake, and it seems the only way for it die is for Tea Cake to die. However, to watch Tea Cake die would kill her. For Janie, it is a far crueler fate than if she had died herself in the water. She prays the doctor will come back, but Tea Cake, out of his mind, comes after her with the pistol. Janie grabs the rifle and aims it at him, hoping to scare him back to his senses. However, there is no reason left in him. She waits until he has fired three times. The fourth time he fires, she shoots him. His final shot misses her.

As he crumples, Janie leaps into his arms to catch him, but Tea Cake sinks his teeth into her arm in a death grip: "It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead. No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right to weep. Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. She had to hug him tight for soon he would be gone, and she had to tell him for the last time. Then the grief of outer darkness descended."

Janie is immediately arrested for Tea Cake's murder. When the doctor explains the circumstances to the judge and sheriff, they agree to try her the same day. She is prosecuted and defended by white men in front of a white jury, with Tea Cake's black friends crowded into the back of the courtroom. Having heard rumors that Janie cheated on Tea Cake with Mrs. Turner's brother, they stare hatefully at her as the witnesses are heard and then Janie herself takes the stand. The only thing she knows to do is go way back to explain how she and Tea Cake loved each other. The jury finds the shooting justifiable, and Janie is released, though Tea Cake's friends are still angry. They say Tea Cake was never anything but good to her, and if she had shot a white man she would not have gotten away with it.

Janie wires Orlando for some of her money and buries Tea Cake in style in Palm Beach. She invites his friends, not blaming them for the way they treated her, knowing they were hurt. They arrive, shamefaced and sorry, and Tea Cake rides "like a Pharaoh to his tomb," with Janie not wearing the expensive veils she wore for Jody, but in her plain overalls: "She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief."

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Among strangers in Palm Beach, Tea Cake is confronted with racism, when two white men keep him away from Janie and force him to bury the dead. The scene offers a contrast with the earlier scene in Chapter 13, when Tea Cake disappears from Janie to party all night. Now, despite some resentment over the racism and the danger that faces him if he tries to escape, Tea Cake's only real concern is that Janie is worrying about him. This prompts him to escape despite the danger, and the two flee back to the Everglades.

There, the consequences of the dog bite are revealed, and Janie wonders if God is again testing her. However, the tests are over, and although she is forced to shoot Tea Cake to defend herself, nothing is able to destroy the love they shared. This is recognized publicly when Janie is acquitted of Tea Cake's murder.

Unfortunately, Tea Cake's friends seem to be infected with the same irrational jealousy that defines the people of Eatonville and that forced Janie to kill Tea Cake. Believing she cheated on him with Mrs. Turner's brother, they blame her for Tea Cake's death. However, Janie combats the mean-spiritedness with a demonstration of love, pity and forgiveness. Although she buries Tea Cake with the same expense and display of style with which she buried Jody Starks, this time she wears nothing but her overalls and her grief.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Janie stays in the Everglades for a little while to make the others feel better, but the muck all around reminds her of Tea Cake, and after a few weeks, she leaves. All she takes with her are the seeds Tea Cake had meant to plant, and which she decides to plant at home for remembrance.

As she finishes her story, Phoeby declares that she has grown ten feet taller just listening and is no longer satisfied with her own life. She tells Janie that she means to make Sam take her fishing, and that nobody had better criticize Janie in her hearing. However, Janie tells her not to feel too mean with the others, because they just do not know anything: "Dem meatskins is *got* tuh rattle tuh make out they's alive. Let 'em consulate theyselves wid talk. 'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else. And listenin' tuh dat kind uh talk is jus' lak openin' yo' mouth and lettin' de moon shine down yo' throat. It's uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. 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."

After Phoeby leaves, Janie thinks of Tea Cake, knowing that as long as she loves him he will never really be dead. Having finally reached that distant horizon she spent her life pursuing, she pulls it around her shoulders and calls her soul to come and see.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Janie's story of finally finding true love through the courage to defy others' expectations profoundly affects Phoeby, who declares that she is going to change her own life. It is clear now that if Janie had simply told Phoeby and the others that Tea Cake had died, the meaning of the events would have been lost. However, Janie believes that even telling the story is not enough—you have to make the decision to live life for yourself before you can ever really change. While this may be true, Janie's assertion that words do not mean anything may not be entirely true, for it is the passage of the story from one woman to the next—in the tradition of an oral tale—that is bound to effect a profound, if subtle change in all the people who hear it.

# Characters

## Janie Crawford

The heroine of the novel, Janie, is the first black woman character in African-American fiction to embark on a journey of self-discovery and achieve independence and self-understanding. But she does not do so until she is nearly forty years old. Many obstacles stand in her way, the first of which is her grandmother, who encourages her to marry Logan Killicks for material security. But Janie discovers that "marriage did not make love," and she decides to leave him. When Joe Starks enters her life, she believes she has found her ticket to the "horizon," so she marries him. But when they arrive in Eatonville, she discovers that she is going to be nothing but an ornament of his power and success. Stifled by Jody and cut off from the rest of the community by her status as the mayor's wife, she learns to hide her real self and wear a mask for Jody and the town that conforms to their expectations for her But in the process she loses sight of the real self she has buried. The narrator tells us, "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew not how to mix them." After twenty years of marriage, an enmity has grown between Janie and her husband that results in her finally speaking up for herself. She tells him, in essence, that he is no longer a real man, and her outburst robs him of the will to live. As he lays on his deathbed, she sums up for him what their marriage has been like for her: "Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tub make room for yours in me."

Having lost herself once, she vows not to do so again, and so she enjoys her freedom after his death. But when Tea Cake walks into her life, she finds a man who complements her search for self awareness rather than squelches it. Under the influence of his all-encompassing love, "her soul crawled out from its hiding place." With Tea Cake, she finds a spiritual sense of love that had been absent in her first two marriages. "Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened the door," she tells him. But many critics have questioned Hurston's decision to make Janie discover her true self in the context of a relationship with a man. What has seemed like a feminist search for identity is undermined by Janie's apparent dependence on Tea Cake, some say. But Janie does eventually gain true independence when she is forced to kill Tea Cake, who has gone mad from being bitten by a rabid dog and has come after her with a gun. Tills final act, although it devastates Janie, also allows her to return home to Eatonville a fully self-sufficient woman who is finally at peace with herself. "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons," she tells her friend Pheoby. Her journey of self-discovery is complete.

## Hezekiah

After Jody's death, Hezekiah replaces him as the store's manager. Janie notices that Hezekiah also begins to take on many of Jody's characteristics.

## Jody

*See* Joe Starks

## Janie Killicks

*See* Janie Crawford

## Logan Killicks

Janie's first husband. Her grandmother has encouraged her to marry him because he can give her a house and sixty acres of farmland, hence security. His ugly appearance and body odor prevent Janie from falling in love with him. When he tells her he is going to buy a mule for her to plow with, Janie decides that life with Logan is not what she bargained for. She leaves rum when the more dashing Joe Starks comes along.

## Motor Boat

A gambling friend of Tea Cake down on the muck. When the hurricane hits, Motor Boat flees with Janie and Tea Cake.

## Nanny

Janie's grandmother, who raises her in the absence of her mother. A former slave who was raped by her master, Nanny teaches Janie that the "nigger woman is de mule uh de world." In her hopes that Janie will have a better life, she encourages her to marry Logan Killicks, a man who will offer her "protection." But not long after Janie marries him, Nanny dies. Later in life, after Jody has died, Janie reassesses the advice Nanny had given her. "Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon. .. and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her." Janie decides that she hates Nanny for teaching her to bury her own desires for the sake of security.

## Nunkie

Young woman on the muck who attempts to lead Tea Cake away from Janie.

## Sop-de-Bottom

A friend of Tea Cake on the muck. He applauds Tea Cake's beating of Janie and attempts to speak up at Janie's trial after she has killed Tea Cake. He wants to accuse Janie of murder but is silenced by a white lawyer.

## Janie Starks

*See* Janie Crawford

## Joe Starks

Jody rescues Janie from her first marriage, whisking her off to Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town where he intends to "be a big voice," something he has been denied in other towns where whites are in control. Although Janie is reluctant to go, Jody "spoke for far horizon," offering Janie a chance for adventure. But shortly after they arrive in Eatonville, Janie finds out that her life with Jody will be anything but exciting. When he becomes mayor and the most respectable citizen in town, she becomes a "pretty doll-baby," as he calls her, a token of his stature in the town. Jody defines himself by his position and possessions, the most valuable of which is Janie. So Jody stifles Janie's development as he silences her and keeps her from participating in the town's talk on the porch of their store. Jody's world becomes a kind of prison for Janie, who is isolated on a pedestal of bourgeois ideals. As Jody grows older and takes his fears of aging out on Janie, she realizes that her "image" of him has "tumbled down and shattered." When he ridicules her aging body in front of others at the store, something breaks in Janie, and she tells him, "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." By belittling his manhood in front of the town, Janie figuratively kills him, as he begins a slow deterioration and dies of kidney failure. Janie attempts to come to terms with Jody on his death bed, and she tells him, "All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice-dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you." But she comes to the conclusion that the only kind of change he was able to create in her life was an outward change in material conditions. Nothing has changed inside of him, and she has not been able to grow at all. When he dies, the only legacy he leaves Janie is his money. At the end of the book, it is the memories of Tea Cake that inhabit the house, not those of Jody.

## Johnny Taylor

The boy who kisses Janie over the fence. This event signals Janie's sexual awakening and instigates Nanny's concerns that Janie will allow an unworthy man to lure her away.

## Mr. Turner

Restaurant owner on the muck who has no control over his wife.

## Mrs. Turner

A light-skinned mulatto woman who befriends Janie on the muck. Her prejudices against those who are blacker than herself reveal the racism within the black community. Her

restaurant, which she owns with her husband, is destroyed by Tea Cake and his friends, who resent her racist attitudes towards them.

## Mrs. Annie Tyler

A woman from Eatonville who ran off with a younger man who was after her money. Her shameful return to the town after he has left her is a warning to Janie, who fears that Tea Cake will do the same to her.

## Pheoby Watson

Janie's "bosom friend" who is her link to the Eatonville community. Pheoby's role in the book is an important one, as she is the audience for Janie's life story, which is the novel. After hearing the whole story, Pheoby tells her, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tub you." Many critics see this statement as the feminist declaration that Janie's story will inspire other women to demand self-fulfillment.

## Janie Woods

*See* Janie Crawford

## Tea Cake Woods

*See* Vergible Woods

## Vergible Woods

When Tea Cake, a young man of twenty-five, enters Janie's life, he changes it forever. He does not possess the outward manifestations of power, namely wealth and position, that Jody did. Instead, he possesses an inner power that comes with self-knowledge and being comfortable with himself. When Janie marries Tea Cake, they move to Jacksonville, and she is initiated into his world. At first he is afraid she will not want to be a part of his community. "You ain't usetuh folks lak dat," he tells her. But she assures him that she "aims tub partake wid everything." When they move to the muck, then, to live amongst the migrant agricultural workers picking beans, Janie and Tea Cake's house becomes the center of the community, hosting dances and card games. Most importantly, Tea Cake allows Janie to feel like she belongs to this community in a way that Jody never let her belong to the Eatonville community. In fact, Tea Cake inspires two important developments in Janie's growth by encouraging her to accept herself and to feel at home in the black community. The space he creates for her that makes these two things possible is a loving relationship that satisfies Janie's spiritual needs, rather than focusing on the material wants that had defined her two previous marriages.

Their relationship is more equal as Tea Cake teaches her how to play checkers, hunt, and fish, activities from which Jody had excluded her because of her gender. Tea Cake almost becomes an Idealized male figure in the book as he provides all of the support and love that has been lacking in Janie's life. However, he also falls back on attitudes of male dominance in his relationship with Janie. Many critics have seen his beating of Janie as an indication that Hurston believed all men possessed the need to overpower women and be the "boss." But Tea Cake is a part of Janie's life for only two years. As they try to escape the devastation of a hurricane in the Everglades, Tea Cake rescues Janie from a rabid dog, only to be bitten himself. By the time they discover Tea Cake's illness, it is too late. When he tries to kill Janie in his madness, she is forced to shoot him to protect herself.

# Setting

Their Eyes Were Watching God takes place during the 1920s and '30s and is set in a series of all-black communities in rural Florida. After the Civil War, former slaves formed a number of towns all over the South, in an effort to escape the segregation and discrimination they experienced among whites. By 1914, approximately thirty such towns were in existence. Eatonville, Florida, the town where Zora Neale Hurston grew up and the setting for much of Their Eyes Were Watching God, was the first such town to be incorporated and to win the right of self-governance. In Eatonville, the Jim Crow laws that segregated public schools, housing, restaurants, theaters, and drinking fountains all over the South, did not exist.

# Social Concerns

Their Eyes Were Watching God embraces timely social issues of racial and gender relationships, spiritual growth, emotional independence, and sense of community.

Zora Neale Hurston, once the most famous black American woman writer and folklorist of the 1920s and 1930s, fell into obscurity by the 1950s. In the following decades the civil rights and feminist movements sparked renewed interest in black women writers, bringing back into favor this novel about an African-American woman's journey to selfdiscovery. Indeed, Janie Mae Crawford's triumph over poverty, lack of education, abusive men, and oppressive traditions foreshadows the transformation of American society as blacks and women attained more equality.

Hurston shows Janie's evolution through relationships with her grandmother, her three husbands, and her best friend, Pheoby Watson. This journey of self-actualization and sisterhood begins with her grandmother's stories of slavery—narratives that explain the fundamental psyche of why blacks accepted the social hierarchy of white men at the top and black women at the bottom. By the novel's conclusion Janie's transformation into a strong, independent, satisfied woman is assured. She has changed in many ways—from a spirited teenager dreaming of idealized love, she became a woman burdened by marriages to emotionally abusive men; after having loved and lost her soulmate, she evolved into a more complete woman, satisfied with her lot in life. The evidence of this emotional satisfaction is in the confidences she shares with Pheoby; then the bond of sisterhood is shown when her friend declares, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo."

Society in the early twentieth century offered few prospects for a poor, uneducated black girl being raised by a grandmother, a former slave. It takes many years for Janie to be satisfied with her life, having been at the mercy of others who determined her future. When Janie is sixteen, Nanny spies her kissing shiftless Johnny Taylor, and tells her "Ah don't want no trashy nigger. . .usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on." Convinced that Janie has reached womanhood, Nanny arranges a match to an older man of means, Logan Killicks, to take good care of her. Several months later Janie abandons her loveless marriage for the stylishly dressed Joe (Jody) Starks, who woos her with his dreams of being a "big voice" in an all-black town. She stays with him until his death, though he had stifled her body and spirit.

The second half of the novel shows Janie's emancipation from Killicks's and Starks's oppressive dominance. Having gained Starks's property, Janie at last achieves financial independence. She can finally make choices about her future, but she still senses Joe's presence in the store, ready to find fault with her. Also, she feels awkward in collecting rent from tenants, because she feels like a "usurper." Others in the community reinforce the notion of male dominance that makes Janie so timid and insecure. For instance, one persistent suitor, Ike Green, tells her that women need men to manage their lives and to guard them from men who can so easily take advantage of them, like a pack of hogs when they see a full trough. Janie knows this is true. Although now the sole owner of

her store, she allows her seventeen-year-old store clerk, Hezekiah, to assume Joe's position of authority. She laughs to herself at his self-important posturing yet depends upon Hezekiah to take charge. The narrative voice mocks the way men maintain their superiority over women:

"This business of managing stores and women store-owners was trying on a man's nerves. He needed a drink of liquor now and then to keep up."

Thus, Janie knowingly enables the teenager to usurp her own rightful authority when she does not assert herself. Instead, she uses her new-found freedom to fish and visit with her best friend. Pheoby, however, also reminds Janie of the community's restrictive standards of propriety by warning her not to let others hear her say she enjoys her independence, because folks will say Janie is not saddened by Joe's death. As she rejects one suitor after another, Janie begins to realize that she has control over her life.

This evolving sense of power and freedom allows her to choose love, not financial means, as the basis for her next marriage.

In her relationship with free-spirited gambler Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods, Janie flaunts her rejection of Eatonville's stifling social code. Twelve years younger, he wins Janie's heart as he plays checkers with her, takes her fishing at night, and combs her hair.

Janie feels like a child breaking the rules by enjoying activities once forbidden by Joe. In this third marriage she finally blossoms. After Janie and Tea Cake move from Eatonville to the Everglades on Lake Okechobee, she has the freedom to be his equal in working and socializing together.

As devoted as they are to each other, distrust threatens their relationship when Tea Cake gambles away $200 that he secretly takes from Janie before winning back $322.

In other instances jealousy almost drives them apart. Once Tea Cake strikes Janie in a fit of anger over Mrs. Turner's meddling.

Another time Janie accuses him of infidelity when Nunkie attempts to seduce him in the cane field. The ultimate test comes during a hurricane as they escape from the rising water, and Tea Cake saves Janie from a menacing dog. However, the rabid dog bites him, and he refuses to get medical care immediately; later, the crazed Tea Cake tries to shoot Janie. To save her life, Janie kills him in self-defense. A white jury finds her innocent on the basis of the doctor's corroborating testimony, yet Janie has lost the one person she loves most.

Thus, Janie changes slowly from a repressed girl to a strong woman. Her evolving through three marital relationships reflects society' transformation—that is, as women gained more equal social and economic rights, they also asserted their increased independence and power. Janie's journey of selfhood reflects her pride in being black and her self-assurance as a single woman who does not need a man to take care of her.

# Social Sensitivity

For southern farmers, both black and white, who did not enjoy the prosperity of northern industrial centers, the Great Depression had begun in the 1920s, well before the stock market crash of 1929. Factors such as soil erosion, the attack of the boll weevil on cotton crops, and the increasing competition from foreign markets led to widespread poverty among southern farmers. The majority of African Americans were still farming in the South, and they were much harder hit than the white population, even after the advent of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The percentage of blacks on relief was three to four times higher than the number of whites, but relief organizations discriminated by race; some would not help blacks altogether, while others gave lower amounts of aid to blacks than they did to whites.

Such practices led one NAACP leader to call the program "the same raw deal." Many commentators have criticized Their Eyes Were Watching God for ignoring the plight of African-American farmers in the South during the 1920s and '30s, although Hurston does briefly describe the downtrodden migrant workers who come to pick beans on the muck. "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, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor."

A large number of African Americans fought in the First World War under the banner of freedom, only to return home to find how far they were from such a goal. By 1920, over one million blacks had fled the South, where they had little chance of rising out of poverty, and migrated to the industrial centers of the North where they obtained jobs in factories and packing houses, eventually making up as much as twenty percent of the industrial work force there.

The migration of blacks to northern cities caused whites to fear that their jobs would be threatened, and increased racial tensions erupted in race riots in 1917. Nonetheless, many blacks began to vocally demand an end to discrimination. Out of this climate came calls for a "New Negro," who would be filled with racial pride and would demand justice for his people. While earlier black leaders, represented by Booker T.

Washington, had accepted segregation and preached cooperation and patience, new black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois insisted that concessions and appeasements were not the correct approach, and that complete equality could only be achieved by demanding it without compromise. Du Bois also believed that the "Talented Tenth," his name for the small percentage of educated blacks, must lead the way for the masses of blacks who still lived in poverty and lacked educational opportunities. Du Bois's ideas were reflected in the newly formed black middle class, which, although small, sought to exert an influence on behalf of all blacks.

The new efforts of this black elite were centered in Harlem, where a large percentage of migrating blacks ended up, turning the area into a rich, thriving center of black culture. The new energy generated there by jazz musicians, writers, artists, actors, and

intellectuals became known as the Harlem Renaissance. This artistic and intellectual movement confronted the racial prejudices of white America by demanding equal recognition for their talent and by depicting the injustices experienced by African Americans. But ironically, although the artists of the Harlem Renaissance intended their works to promote better conditions for blacks less fortunate than themselves, few blacks around the country were even aware of the movement. In fact, it was more often whites who comprised the audiences and readerships of the products of the Harlem Renaissance. A cult of the primitive, which celebrated all things exotic and sensual, had become all the rage in New York and many wealthy whites flocked to Harlem to witness and participate in the revelry. But wealthy whites were essential to the livelihood of many black artists and writers who relied on their patronage, a fact regretted by many who felt that the artistic products of African Americans were muted to appeal to the tastes of the whites on whom they depended. Although the stock market crash of 1929 brought much of the activity in Harlem to an end, the creative energies of those involved had not abated, and many, like Zora Neale Hurston, produced their best work through the 1930s.

# Techniques

Hurston skillfully balances the third-person narrative voice with realistic conversation in the rural black dialect. Structurally, Janie's storytelling to Pheoby frames the novel. Like bookends, the first and last chapters allow the narrative to flash back and then come full circle. The movement of the novel then spirals outward with Pheoby's promise to grow from her friend's experiences and with Janie's reaching out to the horizon.

Language soars to express the amazing journey to selfhood. One of the remarkable aspects in Their Eyes Were Watching God is the realistic depiction of life as the writer knew it, for she had an ear for authentic speech rhythms in dialogue and for vividly realistic imagery. Hurston's lyrical beauty of language rings true with the power of words: "Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song."

The richly evocative language of stories, songs, idioms, and figures of speech makes the novel so memorable. For instance, from the porch of the general store come picturesque scenes of folks gathered to swap tales, gossip, tease, and flirt. One day Janie gets feisty and boldly tells the men that God sometimes confides in women about how men assume they are so superior to women and how surprised men are going to be when they find out they don't know much about women: "It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens," Janie tells the arrogant men. When they call her an old woman of nearly forty, Janie retaliates with playful exaggeration ("playin' de dozens"): "You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but you' big voice.

Humph! Talkin "bout me looking old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." Then there are the porch "mule-talkers" who have fun with Matt Bonner about his skinny mule; they tell Matt the women took the mule down by the lake and "had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh wash board." The porch gatherings allow Hurston to tap into the richness of the black oral tradition and to give dignity to uneducated people and their colorful folk sayings of wit and wisdom.

A notable example of imaginative language as a tool to unify themes is the horizon imagery at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel to emphasize Janie's potential for a full life. She hates her grandmother for having cut off that potential, for having "taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon. . . and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her." When Janie and Tea Cake watch the hurricane with their friends, their eyes stare into the dark sky and measure their own insignificance against God's arbitrary destruction with such forces of nature. In this sense the horizon suggests the fate no one can readily comprehend. By the novel's conclusion, Janie has control of her destiny as she pulls in "her horizon like a great fish-net."

Metaphors and similes also provide a powerful storytelling technique. Janie sees herself like "like a great tree in leaf" with all its pains and pleasures. In contrast to Janie's grandmother's prophetic warning that love is "de very prong all us black women gits

hung on" is Janie's own idealistically romantic vision of the pear tree in her backyard. The tree represents her youthful sensuality and exuberance. This zest for life explodes in vibrant images as young Janie watches a bee, laden with pollen, enter the pear tree bloom and pollinate it. The irony is that she will have to wait many years before reaching this level of emotional completion and sexual fulfillment.

Mules also suggest comparisons in the story. Until Tea Cake enters Janie's life, she must endure the humiliation and abuse by her grandmother and first two husbands.

Nanny compares black women to the mules of the world, because they do all the work.

By forcing Janie to marry Killicks, Nanny ignores Janie's own desires, thinking it is for her granddaughter's own good. Killicks and Starks both have mules and treat them in ways somewhat similar to the way they treat Janie—one mistreats his hard-working mule, and the other puts his (formerly Matt Bonner's yellow mule) out to pasture as a status symbol.

Janie's hair rags offer still another metaphor for oppression. Joe, the ever-jealous husband, sees a man behind Janie lightly touching her beautiful hair and forces Janie to wear a head rag. However, instead of allowing the rags to cover her sense of selfesteem and stifle her spirit, she realizes she has an inside and an outside, and she would not mix them. She attends Joe's funeral with "weeping and wailing outside" but "resurrection and life" inside. That night she burns the oppressive head rags and the next day, her hair swings free in a thick braid well below her waist. Now emancipated, Janie can do what she pleases for the rest of her life.

# Literary Qualities

Although the framing device of Janie telling Pheoby her story sets up the novel as Janie's story, it is not told in the first person.

Instead, a narrative voice tells most of the story, and there has been much discussion of whose voice this is. Claire Crabtree, writing in Southern Literary Journal, argues that it is "always close to but not identical with Janie's consciousness," indicating that the omniscient narrator, who knows more about other characters' thoughts than Janie could know herself, is also closely aligned with the heroine. The narrator also uses free indirect speech at many points to convey Janie's thoughts, another indication that the narrator and Janie's consciousness are closely aligned. But Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his The Signifying Monkey, argues that the narrative voice "echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling." The narrator, then, who speaks in standard English, while the characters speak in black dialect, becomes, according to Gates, more and more representative of the black community as it progressively adopts the patterns of black vernacular speech. The narrative voice takes on the aspect of oral speech, telling not only Janie's story, but many other stories as well.

For example, Nanny's voice takes over as she tells the story of Janie's heritage, and the voices on the porch also take over for long stretches as their "arguments" tell the story of life in Eatonville. In essence, there are many storytellers within the larger story of Janie's life, and many voices inform the novel.

One of the most unique features of Their Eyes Were Watching God is its integration of folklore with fiction. Hurston borrows literary devices from the black rural oral tradition, which she studied as an anthropologist, to further cement her privileging of that tradition over the Western literary tradition. For example, she borrows the technique of repetition in threes found commonly in folklore in her depiction of Janie's three marriages. Also, in the words of Crabtree, "Janie follows a pattern familiar to folklorists of a young person's journey from home to face adventure and various dangers, followed by a triumphant homecoming." In addition, Janie returns "richer and wiser" than she left, and she is ready to share her story with Pheoby, intending that the story be repeated, as a kind of folktale to be passed on.

The Harlem Renaissance, which experienced its heyday in the 1920s but also flourished well into the 1930s, was an outpouring of creative innovation among blacks that celebrated the achievements of black intellectuals and artists. The initial goal of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance was to overcome racism and convince the white public that African-Americans were more intelligent than the stereotypes of docile, ignorant blacks that pervaded the popular arena. In order to do so, then, most of the early writers associated with the movement imitated the themes and styles of mainstream, white literature. But later writers felt that African-American literature should depict the unique and debilitating circumstances in which blacks lived, confronting their

white audiences with scenes of brutal racism. Zora Neale Hurston, considered the most important female member of the Harlem Renaissance, felt that the writings of African-Americans should celebrate the speech and traditions of black people. The use of dialect in Their Eyes Were Watching God caused much controversy among other black writers of the day when it was first published because many felt that such language in the mouths of black characters perpetuated negative stereotypes about blacks as ignorant, but more modern commentators agree that the novel's celebration of black language was the most important contribution Hurston made to African-American literature.

# Thematic Overview

Their Eyes Were Watching God celebrates a woman's awakening to her own place in the world and learning how to love herself after years of oppression. Having endured abandonment, betrayal, powerlessness, and entrapment, Janie achieves independence.

Her long journey toward self-discovery takes her to a mutually loving relationship with Tea Cake, who shows her love's power to transform. Like the sea, love is never the same as it moves and takes its shape from the shore. When her marriage to Tea Cake ends, Janie remains fulfilled with fond memories to sustain her. Without a mate, she enjoys her solitude and freedom, for she has finally found love, light, and peace within herself.

The journey to reach this peace of mind has not been easy, so Janie and Tea Cake's passionate romance is even sweeter after her having endured decades of abuse. At sixteen, Janie protests being forced to marry Logan Killicks, an old man who looks like "some ole skull-head in de grave yard," but Nanny insists he is a good man who will protect her from harm in the cruel world where "de white man is de ruler of everything." When the white man throws down the load, he tells the black man to pick it up; then, the black man hands the load over to his woman, making her "de mule uh de world." Years later Janie recalls with hatred how her grandmother sold her out and how her first two husbands abused her as their work mules. Yet her soul survives being trampled on. "She was a rut in the road.

Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels."

Janie's survival tale of self-discovery and romance is intertwined with the triumph of the black woman in a racist society. Although racial prejudice and conflict do not overshadow the novel's predominant themes of love and self-awakening, racial issues do occasionally surface to explain characterization and plot elements. Janie's grandmother's mistrust of white men comes from her bitter memories of slavery. After Nanny is raped and bears her white master's child, the man's enraged wife beats her and threatens to have her whipped with hundred lashes on her bare back until blood gushes. She also plans to sell the baby, Janie's mother. To avoid this punishment, Nanny escapes.

Years later she instills in Janie the lessons of enslavement. However, Nanny also tells her about the Washburns, "quality white folks," for whom she worked. In fact, because Janie was born in the house in the Washburns' backyard and raised with white children, she considered herself just like them. At six, however, she becomes aware of being different. While Janie does not suffer the blatant discrimination her Nanny did, the legacy of slavery remains as the novel's subtext about brutal oppression.

The teacher who rapes Nanny's seventeenyear-old daughter, Leafy, is not identified as white or black, but Nanny distrusts all men: "Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you."

Racism darkens the novel's thematic landscape in more subtle ways than Nanny's slave narrative and her warnings to Janie.

For instance, Joe Starks, who dazzles Janie with his stylish airs of success, had worked for whites and emulates their superiority in dealing with other blacks. His house is painted a "gloaty, sparkly white." Another African-American character who has internalized the white race's superiority in the social hierarchy is Mrs. Turner. Being lightskinned, she approves of Janie's "coffeeand-cream complexion" and loathes darker blacks. Mrs. Turner's vicious harangue against blacks and especially Booker T.

Washington shocks Janie, but when she tries to persuade Janie to leave Tea Cake for her light-skinned, out-of-work brother, Janie rejects her fanatic prejudice. A few other references to the caste system intrude on Janie and Tea Cake's nearly all-black world.

After the devastating hurricane, when two white men force Tea Cake to help bury the dead, they instruct him to identity the corpses' race, because only the whites get coffins. Later, after Janie kills Tea Cake in self-defense, she finds herself at the mercy of an all-white judicial system, but the testimony of the white doctor saves her.

Hurston acknowledges the reality of slavery's horrors without vilifying the entire white race and without demanding retribution. Some critics have felt that Hurston unduly limits her portrayal of racism, because she profited from white patronage, as many Harlem Renaissance artists did. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Wallace Thurman, and Darwin T.

Turner have attacked her writing because they thought she tried too hard to please white readers. Others, especially feminist writers like Alice Walker, go beyond the novel's racial dimensions to praise the universal qualities of human endurance and love.

# Themes

## Search for Self

Although the novel follows Janie through three relationships with men, most critics see its main theme to be Janie's search for herself. She must fight off the influences of her grandmother, who encourages her to sacrifice self-fulfillment for security, and her first two husbands, who stifle her development. Her second husband, Jody, has an especially negative impact on Janie's growth as his bourgeois aspirations turn her into a symbol of his stature in the town. She is not allowed to be herself, but must conform to his notions of propriety, which means she cannot enjoy the talk of the townsfolk on the porch, let alone participate in it. After he is elected mayor, she is asked to give "a few words uh encouragement," but Jody interrupts the applause by telling the town, "mah wife don't know nothin "bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for her nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." After this, Janie feels "cold," realizing that by cutting her off, Jody has prevented her from deciding for herself whether or not she even wanted to give a speech. Throughout the rest of her marriage, Janie must bury her own desires to the point where she loses sight of them altogether. But after Jody's death she feels a freedom she has never known.

When the young Tea Cake enters her life, she decides that she has done what Jody and the town have wanted her to do long enough, so she rejects their ideas for her future and marries a younger man. Her relationship with Tea Cake allows her to find herself in a way that had not been possible before. But some critics see Tea Cake as another obstacle to Janie's development. In some ways, their relationship is conventional in the sense that Janie willingly defers to his judgment and follows him on his adventures. "Once upon uh time, Ah never 'spected nothin', Tea Cake, but being' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh," she tells him. "But you come 'long and made somethin' out me." Statements like this have caused critics to question how successful Janie is at discovering her true self. Some see the ending as a reaffirmation that a woman must find herself on her own. By killing Tea Cake in self-defense, although she deeply regrets having to do so, Janie has come full circle in her development. She now knows who she is and has found "peace." In the closing lines the narrator tells us, "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net," indicating that she no longer has to seek for meaning outside of herself in the world; she has found It within herself.

## Language and Meaning

Integral to Janie's search for self is her quest to become a speaking subject. Language is depicted in the novel as the means by which one becomes a full-fledged member of the community and, hence, a full human being. In Eatonville, the men engage in "eternal arguments, ... a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason."_ These contests in language are the central activities in the town, but only the men are allowed to participate Janie especially regrets being excluded, but "gradually, she pressed her

teeth together and learned to hush.'" But the darn of repressed language erupts when Jody ridicules her aging body in front of the men in the store Her speech then becomes a weapon as she tells him (and everyone else), "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uhlife.'" By comparing him to a woman going through menopause, she attacks his manhood in an irretrievable way. Janie has gained her voice, and in the process has metaphorically killed her husband, whose strength has resided in her silence and submission. Later, when Janie and Tea Cake are on the muck, Janie becomes a full member of the community, as signified by her ability as a speaking subject. "The men held big arguments here like they used to on the store porch Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest.'" At the end of the book, Janie's return to tell her story to the town, through Pheoby, signals to some critics her reintegration in the community. Others, though, believe she is still excluded because she will not speak to them directly.

## Race and Racism

Although there is very little discussion of relations between whites and blacks in the novel, racism and class differences are shown to have infected the African-American community. The supposed biological and cultural superiority of whiteness hovers over the lives of all the black characters in the book, as Janie witnesses the moral bankruptcy of those who value whiteness over their own black selves. Joe Starks is on his way to Eatonville when Janie meets him, because he is tired of being subservient to whites. He intends in an all-black town to have power over others, a kind of power that is modeled on that of white men. He possesses a "bow-down command in his face," and his large white house impresses the town because it makes the rest of the houses in town resemble "servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house,'" reflecting the housing arrangements of plantations during slavery He also buys a desk like those owned by prominent white men in the neighboring town of Maitland and adopts behaviors which mimic the habits of middle-class whites For Jody, success is measured by standards adopted from the white community, and as a result, he looks down on the townsfolk as "common" and even as his inferiors. One of the men comments, "You kin feel a switch in his hand when he's talking to yuh.'" Janie's rejection of Jody's feelings of superiority and his emphasis on attaining bourgeois respectability have led many critics to see the novel as a critique of middle-class blacks who had gained some prestige in the 1920s but had also lost their connection with the roots of the black community, the folk.

This critique becomes more explicit in Janie and Tea Cake's dismissal of Mrs. Turner's feelings of superiority over dark-skinned blacks. As a fair-skinned and financially well-off mulatto, Mrs. Turner desires to separate herself and Janie, who is also mulatto, from the "blackfolks." She tells Janie, "We oughta lighten up de race," and "Us oughta class off." But Janie responds, "Us can't *do* it. We'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks." For Janie, there are no divisions in the black community. She has moved easily from her high-class position in Eatonville to her life amongst the folk with Tea Cake, and together they have welcomed the black workers from the Bahamas, who had previously been ostracized from the African-Americans on

the muck In addition, Mrs. Turner's racist Ideas are ridiculed by the narrator, who writes, "Behind her crude words was a belief that somehow she and others through worship could attain her paradise-a heaven of straight-haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs. The physical impossibilities in no way injured faith." Racism and division within the African-American community are finally revealed as not only ridiculous but as tragic, as a woman like Mrs. Turner is consumed by self hatred, the inherent by-product of her disdain of blackness. Only through a loving acceptance of all things black can one become a full, healthy human being, as Janie learns.

# Style

## Narration

Although the framing device of Janie telling Pheoby her story sets up the novel as Janie's story, it is not told in the first person. Instead, a narrative voice tells most of the story, and there has been much discussion of whose voice this is. Claire Crabtree, writing in *Southern Literary Journal,* argues that it is "always close to but not identical with Janie's consciousness,'" indicating that the omniscient narrator, who knows more about other characters' thoughts than Janie could know herself, is also closely aligned with the heroine. The narrator also uses free indirect speech at many points to convey Janie's thoughts, another indication that the narrator and Janie's consciousness are closely aligned. But Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *The Signifying Monkey,* argues that the narrative voice "echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling." The narrator, then, who speaks in standard English, while the characters speak in black dialect, becomes, according to Gates, more and more representative of the black community as it progressively adopts the patterns of black vernacular speech. The narrative voice takes on the aspect of oral speech, telling not only Janie's story, but many other stories as well For example, Nanny's voice takes over as she tells the story of Janie's heritage, and the voices on the porch also take over for long stretches as their "arguments" tell the story of life in Eatonville. In essence, there are many storytellers within the larger story of Janie's life, and many voices inform the novel.

## Folklore

One of the most unique features of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is its integration of folklore with fiction. Hurston borrows literary devices from the black rural oral tradition, which she studied as an anthropologist, to further cement her privileging of that tradition over the Western literary tradition. For example, she borrows the technique of repetition in threes found commonly in folklore in her depiction of Janie's three marriages. Also, in the words of Claire Crabtree, "Janie follows a pattern familiar to folklorists of a young person's journey from home to face adventure and various dangers, followed by a triumphant homecoming." In addition, Janie returns "richer and wiser" than she left, and she is ready to share her story with Pheoby, intending that the story be repeated, as a kind of folktale to be passed on.

## Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, which experienced its heyday in Harlem in the 1920s but also flourished well into the 1930s, was an outpouring of creative innovation among blacks that celebrated the achievements of black intellectuals and artists. The initial goal of the

writers of the Harlem Renaissance was to overcome racism and convince the white public that African-Americans were more intelligent than the stereotypes of docile, ignorant blacks that pervaded the popular arena. In order to do so, then, most of the early writers associated with the movement imitated the themes and styles of mainstream, white literature. But later writers felt that African-American literature should depict the unique and debilitating circumstances in which blacks lived, confronting their white audiences with scenes of brutal racism. Zora Neale Hurston, considered the most important female member of the Harlem Renaissance, felt that the writings of African-Americans should celebrate the speech and traditions of black people. The use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* caused much controversy among other black writers of the day when it was first published because many felt that such language in the mouths of black characters perpetuated negative stereotypes about blacks as ignorant, but critics today agree that the novel's celebration of black language was the most important contribution Hurston made to African-American literature,

# Historical Context

## The Great Depression

For southern farmers, both black and white, who did not enjoy the prosperity of northern industrial centers, the Great Depression had begun in the 1920s, well before the stock market crash of 1929. Factors such as soil erosion, the attack of the boll weevil on cotton crops, and the increasing competition from foreign markets led to widespread poverty amongst southern farmers. The majority of African-Americans were still farming in the South and they were much harder hit than the white population, even after the advent of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The numbers of blacks on relief were three to four times higher than the number of whites. but relief organizations discriminated by race; some would not help blacks altogether, while others gave lower amounts of aid to blacks than they did to whites. Such practices led one NAACP leader to call the program "the same raw deal." Many critics have criticized *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for ignoring the plight of African-American farmers in the South during the 1920s and 30s, although Hurston does briefly describe the downtrodden migrant workers who come to pick beans on the muck. "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, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor."

## The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance

A large number of African-Americans fought in the First World War under the banner of freedom, only to return home to find how far they were from such a goal. By 1920, over one million blacks had fled the South, where they had little chance of rising out of poverty, and migrated to the industrial centers of the North where they obtained jobs in factories and packing houses, eventually making up as much as twenty percent of the industrial work force there. The migration of blacks to northern cities caused whites to fear that their jobs would be threatened, and increased racial tensions erupted in race riots in 1917. Nonetheless, many blacks began to vocally demand an end to discrimination. Out of this climate came calls for a "New Negro," who would be filled with racial pride and demand justice for his people. While earlier black leaders, represented by Booker T. Washington, had accepted segregation and preached cooperation and patience, new black leaders like W. E. B. DuBois insisted that concessions and appeasements were not the correct approach, and that complete equality could only be achieved by demanding it without compromise. DuBois also believed that the "Talented Tenth," his name for the small percentage of educated blacks, must lead the way for the masses of blacks who still lived in poverty and lacked educational opportunities. DuBois's ideas were reflected in the newly formed black middle class, which, although small, sought to exert an influence on behalf of all blacks. The new efforts of this black elite were centered in Harlem, where a large percentage of migrating blacks ended up, turning the area into a rich, thriving center of black culture.

The new energy generated there by jazz musicians, writers, artists, actors, and intellectuals became known as the Harlem Renaissance. This artistic and intellectual movement confronted the racial prejudices of white America by demanding equal recognition for their talent and by depicting the injustices experienced by African-Americans. But ironically, although the artists of the Harlem Renaissance intended their works to promote better conditions for blacks less fortunate than themselves, few blacks around the country were even aware of the movement. In fact, it was more often whites who comprised the audiences and readerships of the products of the Harlem Renaissance. A cult of the primitive, which celebrated all things exotic and sensual, had become all the rage in New York and many wealthy whites flocked to Harlem to witness and participate in the revelry. But wealthy whites were essential to the livelihood of many black artists and writers who relied on their patronage, a fact regretted by many who felt that the artistic products of African-Americans were muted to appeal to the tastes of the whites they depended on. Although the stock market crash of 1929 brought much of the activity in Harlem to an end, the creative energies of those involved had not abated, and many, like Zora Neale Hurston, produced their best work through the 1930s.

## Race Colonies

After the Civil War, former slaves formed a number of all-black towns allover the South, in an effort to escape the segregation and discrimination they experienced amongst whites. By 1914, approximately thirty such towns were in existence. Eatonville, Florida, the town where Zora Neale Hurston grew up and the setting for much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* was the first such town to be incorporated and to win the right of self-governance. In Eatonville, the Jim Crow laws, that segregated public schools, housing, restaurants, theaters, and drinking fountains allover the South, did not exist.

# Critical Overview

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* first appeared, it was warmly received by white Critics. Lucille Tompkins of the *New York Times Book Review* called it "a well nigh perfect story-a little sententious at the start, but the rest is simple and beautiful and shining with humor" But many of Hurston's fellow writers of the Harlem Renaissance criticized the novel for not addressing "serious" issues, namely strained race relations. Alain Locke, reviewing for *Opportunity,* recognized the author's "gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor," but he asks, "when will the Negro novelist of maturity... come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?" Richard Wright, in his review in *New Masses,* had even more scathing objections to the novel. According to Wright, "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh." Wright felt that instead of taking on "serious" subjects, she writes to entertain "a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." Many objected to the use of dialect in the novel, a difficult subject for Harlem Renaissance writers who felt that black speech had been exploited and ridiculed by mainstream theater and literature. As a result, many were reluctant to try to realistically depict the speech patterns of the black folk, and they saw in Hurston's use of dialect a degrading picture of rural blacks.

As a result of such criticisms, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* soon disappeared from print. But in the late 1960s, when interest in African-American and women's studies began to take hold, a number of African-American women across the country rediscovered the book and made it an underground sensation. Photocopies of the novel circulated at conferences, and Alice Walker's essay "Looking for Zora," published in *Ms.* magazine in 1975, galvanized efforts to get the novel back into print. Since 1978, it has been widely available, and the scholarly interest in it has been intense. In fact, previous judgements against the novel have been overturned by a number of respectable critics who have helped establish *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a classic of African-American literature and helped procure it a prominent position in the American literary canon.

Most significantly, recent Critics have recognized a celebration of black culture in the novel that belies any notion that Hurston is pandering to a white audience. As Cheryl Wall explains, in her article "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," She asserted that black people, while living in a racist society that denied their humanity, had created an "alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings." And, she argues, by invoking this culture, Hurston shows us that black men and women "attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it." One way that Hurston embraced the culture of rural, southern blacks, was to depict its folklore and language in a way that relished its creativity. Contemporary critics praise her for this above all else, for in her search for a suitable language for African- American literature, she initiated an effort to free black language from domination by the white culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains the significance of tins act: "For Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines

the search for the self." In this way, critics have been able to show that Hurston, far from ignoring the serious social Issues of her day, was engaged in a serious project of resuscitating a language and culture that was in danger of being corrupted by racist oppression. In fact, Gay Wilentz argues, in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer,* that the novel is one of "resistance" because it portrays "the pressure of the dominant culture on the thoughts and actions of the all-black community of Eatonville as well as blacks as a whole." In other words, although she largely ignored the overt racism that critics of the Harlem Renaissance wanted her to address, she explored the more subtle and perhaps more dangerous kind of racism that infects the black culture and makes it despise itself. The racial pride that Hurston preached, then, was as radical a statement as any of the Harlem Renaissance, contemporary critics argue.

Although scholars have been eager to embrace the novel's celebration of black culture, much more problematic has been understanding and accepting Its perspective on gender. With the book's rediscovery in the 1960s, feminists lauded it as an expression of female self-development and empowerment. More recently, though, many scholars have begun to question such a reading. Jennifer Jordon argues, for example, in her article in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* that "Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements." Furthermore, as Mary Helen Washington insists in her article "'I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands': Emergent Female Hero," Janie never becomes a speaking subject, because "Hurston's strategy of having much of Janie's tale told by an omniscient third person rather than by a first person narrator undercuts the development of Janie's 'voice.'" But most troubling to critics has been the fact that Janie seems to discover herself in the context of a relationship with a man, Tea Cake, rather than on her own, a defect that many see as remedied by Janie's killing of Tea Cake. "[A]s a feminist," Claire Crabtree argues, Hurston "did not want Janie to find fulfillment in a man, but rather in her new-found self." But for others, the book does not end there, rather with her return to Eatonville, which seems to signal an end to her self-exploration, according to Washington, who claims that "left without a man, she (Janie) exists in a position of stasis." But Wall refuses to read the ending as "tragic." "For with Tea Cake as her guide, Jan[i]e has explored the soul of her culture and learned how to value herself."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Domina, an author and instructor at Hofstra University, describes Hurston's novel in terms of Janie Stark's "voice" and how her ability to express herself evolves through the course of the story.*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is generally considered Zora Neale Hurston's most important piece of fiction. Hurston, a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, also published anthropological texts, including *Tell My Horse,* and an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road. Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published in 1937, and was quite popular, although some critics argued that she should have written a more aggressive protest similar to Richard Wright's *Native Son.* Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* went out of print for several years, it came back into print during the late 1970s and has since remained a central text in many high school and college courses. In this novel, Hurston explores social and personal relations within black families and communities, while also examining issues of gender and class. One theme through which these Issues of gender, race, and class are examined is voice. At several points in the text, Janie Starks, the protagonist, 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.

During the course of the novel, Janie is married three times. The men differ from each other in significant ways, and each marriage helps Janie define her own desires and goals in life. Her first husband, Brother Logan Killicks, is chosen for her by her grandmother, Nanny, who recognizes that Janie is beginning to feel adult sexual desires, although Janie herself might not articulate her new longings this way. Because she has observed "shiftless Johnny Taylor" kissing Janie, Nanny believes Janie will soon act more dramatically on these desires and therefore urges her to marry a responsible and conventional man. Although Janie responds that Logan Killicks "look like some ole skull head in de grave yard,"_ Nanny arranges the marriage because she worries about Janie's future. Realizing she is probably close to death, Nanny reminds Janie that she "ain't got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo'self. De thought uh you bein' lacked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin' thing."

Janie's first marriage occurs, then, despite her resistance Because of her youth and the lack of options available to her as a young and comparatively poor woman, Janie cannot act on her own desires; she marries Logan Killicks because she seems to have no other choice. Although she hopes love will follow marriage, Janie is soon disappointed, for Logan grows more rather than less distasteful to her. He refuses to bathe regularly and soon suggests that Janie should help him with the plowing He leaves to buy another mule, one that would be "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im." This scene is reminiscent of a statement Nanny had made to Janie earlier, that "woman is de mule uh de world." Janie, however, decides that she will not be treated as a mule even if she has to reject the values her grandmother has taught her.

Janie meets Joe Starks, who invites her to accompany him to a town made "all outa colored folks." Because Logan begins to insult Janie's family history, she decides to leave him for Joe, who initially seems more considerate and companionable. Soon, however, Janie realizes that Joe perceives her simply as his trophy. He will be mayor of the new town, and she will be nothing more or less than the mayor's wife. Although the townspeople congregate on the porch of Joe's store, where Janie often works as a clerk, Joe forbids her to participate in their jokes or storytelling. Those conversations, Joe suggests, are not appropriate for a woman of her class. Because Janie is once again deprived of her voice, she can never be fully a member of this community and instead must live in emotional isolation.

During her marriage to Joe, the mule again appears as a symbol. A man in their town, Matt Bonner, owns a yellow mule which he seems to be working to death. When Joe overhears Janie quietly protesting, he forces Matt to sell the mule to him for $5.00, impressing his companions with his ability to satisfy his financial whims. Joe permits the mule to live the rest of his days in comparative ease, but when the mule dies, he forbids Janie to participate in the mock funeral the others hold. Similarly, although Joe doesn't want to work Janie like a mule in the manner of Logan Killicks, he has metaphorically "bought" her as a demonstration of his own power.

Once again, Janie must choose either to accept what seems to be her fate or to actively oppose It. When Joe attempts to humiliate her publicly, "Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's [Joe's] face, and that was something that hadn't been done before." She insults his masculinity, shaming him before the other men. After this, although Janie and Joe continue to live together, they live emotionally separate lives until Joe dies.

Janie's third husband's given name is Vergible Woods, although his nickname is Tea Cake. Most people cannot understand Janie's attraction to Tea Cake because he is neither conventional like Logan Killicks nor a middle-class businessman like Joe Starks. Rather, Tea Cake makes much of his money through gambling, and when he Isn't gambling, he's often playing the guitar and planning a party. In addition, his complexion is very dark, at a time when some people (represented in this novel by the character of Mrs. Turner) believed that lighter skin was more attractive. Simultaneously, Tea Cake is several years younger than Janie, so some people suspect his motives. Yet Janie enjoys herself with Tea Cake more than she has with any other man. Tea Cake does not limit her to a particular role; he enjoys life and invites Janie to be simply herself. He invites her to play checkers on the porch as Joe never had, "and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought It natural for her to play." Perhaps most significantly, "Look how she had been able to talk with him right off!"

The shift in Janie's character is demonstrated through several small changes. Although her luxurious hair is one of her most attractive characteristics, Joe had insisted she wear it bound up because he was jealous that other men might enjoy it. After Joe dies, she begins to wear her hair in a long braid. When she marries Tea Cake, she begins to dress in overalls rather than in middle-class dresses because she finds the pants more

comfortable and convenient. She also begins to work in the fields after she and Tea Cake move to the Everglades, not because Tea Cake decides to treat her like a mule as Logan Killicks had or because Tea Cake fails to support her as a more "proper" husband would, but because she enjoys Tea Cake's company and the social interaction that occurs among the other workers. Janie hence achieves her greatest sense of fulfillment when she disregards conventional values and aspirations.

But the novel doesn't conclude with Janie and Tea Cake living happily ever after. During a hurricane, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while attempting to rescue Janie from drowning, and he himself contracts rabies. As his illness progresses, he becomes increasingly paranoid and begins to distrust Janie's faithfulness. When he threatens to shoot her, Janie kills him in self-defense, though she had hoped he would die peacefully. Yet, even as Tea Cake dies, Janie desires to comfort him: "A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead. No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right to weep. Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. She had to hug him tight for soon he would be gone, and she had to tell him for the last time" This hour is like eternity for Janie, however, because its effects will be permanent for her.

Janie is tried for Tea Cake's murder. Although many of her black acquaintances are angry that Tea Cake is dead, the all-white Jury acquits her. Critics have debated the significance of the trial scene, for Janie's testimony is summarized rather than dramatized. While some critics have suggested that this scene indicates that Janie has once again lost (or been deprived of) her ability to speak, others suggest that she now can choose when and how to speak. During the trial, Janie is deprived of a community, since the black male and female witnesses oppose her, while the people who compose the jury and support her are all white men. Perhaps her voice is silent here not because she is unable to speak but because communication necessitates a receptive audience.

Readers must not forget, however, that the entire novel is in fact spoken in Janie's voice. The novel is framed by two chapters in which Janie is speaking to her best friend, Pheoby, and the action or plot of the novel is the story she tells Pheoby. So although the point of view frequently shifts in the novel, from one character's perspective to another's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, finally, Janie's story.

Source: Lynn Domina, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

# Critical Essay #2

*Crabtree maintains that the close connection between the themes of feminist/black self-determination and traditional or folk material needs to be further explored. She dwells, among other things, on the storytelling frame, on Hurston's use of language, and her incorporation of a folk consciousness in her narration.*

Recent years have seen a renewal of interest in the work of Zora Neale Hurston marked by the publication of Robert Hemenway's 1977 biography and the anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing.* Articles by Lloyd W. Brown, S. Jay Walker and Mary Helen Washington discuss Hurston's best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* in terms of its themes of feminism and black self-determination An area that remains virtually untapped in Hurston criticism is the intimate connection between these themes and the folkloric themes and motifs which Hurston has embedded in her novel. Critics have largely neglected or misunderstood Hurston's conscious use of traditional or "folk" materials in the novel. Further, most readers find the ending of the novel dissonant and see It as weakening the work, while a recognition of the uses Hurston intended for traditional materials will not thoroughly Justify her authorial decisions, It can help to explain the apparent weakness of the ending and to show that the novel presents a rhetoric of authenticity-an Implicit assertion that it represents "real" black life-introduced Initially by the storytelling frame and reinforced by various techniques throughout the novel.

It may be useful to delineate four aspects of the transformation of folk material into the body of the tale of Janie Crawford's journey through three marriages to a final position of self-realization. They are: Hurston's use of the storytelling "frame" of the story as well as of other conventions from oral tradition; her use of the language, metaphor and symbol of a specific rural community; her incorporation of certain kinds of gaming and other performances as incidents within the narrative; and her attempt to situate the narrative voice in a collective folk consciousness toward the end of the book. Folklore is, in fact, so thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the novel as to be inextricably bound to the themes of feminism and Black self-determination which Hurston is exploring. The value of the folk experience is Itself as strong an assertion of the novel as the need of Blacks for self-determination and the right of women to be autonomous.. ..

Hurston presents Janie's story within a storytelling frame, but equally significant, as a story that is designed to be repeated. In folkloristic terms, Janie's story is a memorate or true experience narrative placed within a fictional framework but nonetheless privileging itself and asserting its own authenticity. The form of a folktale is in part determined by its replicability; it must be developed through a series of events that can be recalled and reconstructed by various tellers....

Within the storytelling frame Janie's life is depicted as a spiritual journey, in Janie's words, a journey to the horizon and back as "a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life ... De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin," Janie follows a pattern familiar to folklorists of a young person's journey from home to face adventure and various dangers, followed

by a triumphant homecoming. Like the hero of a folktale, Janie Crawford leaves home behind her, meets strangers who become either allies or enemies, expresses the transformations she undergoes through costumes and disguises which are invested with special significance, experiences reversals in her perceptions of individual people and events, and returns cleansed, enlightened and alone.

The folktale's repetition of events in a series of three is duplicated in Janie's three marriages, as well as by her movement out of the rural community of Nanny, her grandmother, and her first husband, to the town where she keeps a store with Joe Starks, and finally to the "muck" of the Everglades where she experiences joy and bereavement through Tea Cake, her third husband.

The three marriages and the three communities in which Janie moves represent increasingly wide circles of experience and opportunities for expression of personal choice. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, had in fact been a slave and had borne a child to her master. The marriage Nanny forces upon Janie represents a practical arrangement which brings with It another kind of servitude. Feminist themes fuse with themes of Black self-determination as Janie discards her apron, historically the badge of the slave woman as well as of the docile wife, and goes off with Joe Starks. Hurston justifies Janie's abandonment of her first marriage, not on the grounds that Janie feels no love for Killicks, who "look like some ole skull head in de graveyard," but because Killicks decides to buy a mule for Janie to work the fields with-since she has borne him no heir. Janie needs freedom and an expansion of her horizons more than she needs love-a theme which will surface again, particularly when the novel's ending deflates the romanticism of the relationship with Tea Cake and excises the romantic hero from the heroine's life yet leaves her stronger rather than weaker. Here Hurston consciously rejects the happy ending of the traditional novel.

The second marriage to a man of higher ambitions puts Janie in touch with a larger world, that of the all-Black town which Joe founds, but leaves her stifled and controlled by Joe's white-inspired values. Like Killicks, Joe dictates Janie's work and prevents her from being a full participant in the social life of the town. Only after Joe's death does Janie find the freedom and spontaneity which she values and seeks, in her marriage to Tea Cake. Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons literally and figuratively by transplanting her to the Everglades to mingle with other itinerant workers as well as by simply encouraging her to determine her own work and to take part in the "play"-the music, dancing and gaming-of the workers in the "muck."

In recent years critics have been unanimous in praising the vitality of Hurston's language: Hurston is a master at transforming the language of a folk group, in this case the West Florida Blacks of the town in which she herself grew up, into convincing dialogue The authenticity of the language, although documented, is much less important as a "slice of life" than as an implicit claim of authority about Black life. The success of Hurston's novel depends upon the melding of folkloric and fictional elements in such a way as to create characters whose speech is both reflective of the language of the folk and highly individualized. Hurston's novel asserts itself as a statement that goes beyond

the limitations of the local color story because her characters and their speech are plausible, individualized and enduringly interesting....

Both the unselfconscious use of metaphoric language and the more performance oriented forms of expression found in the novel represent men's and women's use of imagination to enliven and elaborate upon the events of their lives. The very limitation and deprivation of life in rural areas and among poor people can produce, as Hurston knew from her work as a folklorist and anthropologist, a flowering of highly imaginative modes of thought and expression. If Hurston had sought simply to preserve the oral culture of this region of West Florida through her novel, she would not have produced a successful novel, but rather an ethnography. However, she instead has transformed folk materials into fiction. Specific performances in the novel symbolize for Janie the kind of active participation in life which has been denied to Blacks, women, and the poor by society and circumstance. The mock funeral of Matt Bonner's mule is linked in the reader's mind with Nanny's notion of woman as "de mule of the world," who carries the burdens laid on her by whites and by Black males. The political statements implicit in the courting rituals enacted in front of Joe Starks' store suggest the sexual politics operative in Janie's marriage to Joe, as well as in her earlier marriage to Logan Killicks. In each of the instances, the woman is seen as valuable only as long as she hesitates; once she is won over and possessed in some way, she ceases to arouse interest or be perceived as valuable. The mule becomes a motif linked to Nanny, Killicks and Starks. It was, in fact, Killicks' decision to put Janie to work behind a mule which set the stage for her elopement with Starks Hurston's use of a narrative voice that parallels and reinforces Janie's expanding view of the world makes it clear that folklore is integrated into all levels of the text. In fact, the narrative voice, always close to but not identical with Janie's consciousness, becomes more prominent toward the end of the book, as if to suggest that the folkloric material is directly relevant to Janie's final achievement of harmony and peace. Folklore is a thematic element, as well as a component of the themes of Janie's search for identity and self-determination as a Black and as a woman.

If folklore is simply one way for men and women to order and interpret their lives and environments, then the title, whose relevance to the book as a whole is not transparent, becomes more accessible. The eyes of the folk watch God and the elements for signs of safety and indications of where and how each one fits into society and the world. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a book about a woman's journey of self-discovery, but also about a woman's exploration of the physical and social worlds available to her. If it were a simple tale of romantic love... Janie's loss of Tea Cake at the end would be a tragedy, depriving her life of the meaning she had finally found. But this is not the case; Tea Cake represents something more to Janie than the presence of a single man. He is represented as a wanderer who shows Janie who she is and can be and who magically remains present to her even after his death.

Tea Cake combines a sense of his own identity as a Black and a concomitant ability to set his own standards for himself with a natural acceptance of and faith in Janie, which enables her to define her own standards for herself. The heart of the life that Janie so much enjoys in the Florida "muck" is folk expression in the form of playing and gaming in the fields or singing and tale-telling in the cabin and "jook."

The flood and Tea Cake's death toward the end of the novel are problematic from a traditional critical point of view. Janie's shooting of Tea Cake after he has been maddened by a bite from a rabid dog during the flood seems implausible. A traditional female protagonist would be happily placed in an appropriate marriage at the end of the book, or else would experience 'the loss of her man as a tragedy. Again Hurston challenges conventional norms by integrating the expectations of a folktale with the form of the novel, for Janie returns from her adventure into the big world With Tea Cake much as a young male character in a folktale returns home both richer and wiser than he left. Further, she has struggled with the giant-that is, with storms and death-and returned victorious. In the folk tale, the magical teacher is dispensed with as the hero triumphs, and so is Tea Cake left behind on Janie's journey. The flood serves to remove the characters from the life of social interaction in Eatonville and later in the Everglades and puts them into the elemental struggle of natural disaster. Here the narrative voice becomes strong and increasingly suggestive of a sort of collective, choric voice. Storm, flood and death are personified. The effect of this shift is an emphasis on the universal nature of Janie's experience.

When the narrator says of Janie, Tea Cake and their friends as they wait out the storm, "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God," Hurston is speaking of the universal human situation as well as of the specific plights of these characters. Aspects of performance and folk culture are portrayed by Hurston as an expression of courage and creativity in the face of everyday realities such as poverty and deprivation, as well as catastrophe and imminent death. The book's title suggests that men and women, confronting "dark" unknowns such as loss and death, create or recognize a force behind reality that makes sense out of it....

The apparent weakness of the ending of the novel is perhaps explained by the possibility that Hurston, as a feminist, did not want Janie to find fulfillment in a man, but rather in her new-found self, and thus tried to re-orient the form towards the traditional story of the young male There is a suggestion of the literary theme of the birth of the artist, as well as of the folk theme of the triumphant young male.

Source: Claire Crabtree, "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism, and Black Self-Determination" in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* In *Southern Literacy Journal,* Spring, 1985, pp 54-66.

# Critical Essay #3

*Cantarow, a white feminist on a panel with a black feminist, speaks out on sex, race, and criticism, comparing Kate Chopin's* The Awakening *to Zora Neale Hurston's* Their Eyes Were Watching God, *and contends that, of the two heroines, Janie, a slave's granddaughter, comes off the stronger compared to Edna, from an upper-class white family.*

I'd like to begin with a memory that came to my mind as I was re-reading the two books we're to discuss this morning. Two years ago, when I was teaching at SUNY/Old Westbury, my car broke down on my way to class. I found myself in one of those high-class, desolate neighborhoods. You know. Plush desolation. No stores. Beautifully manicured streets but not a soul in sight. Hundred thousand dollar houses surrounded by fences and exquisitely tended shrubbery. A woman let me in at one of these houses. She looked to be in her late fifties. It was noon, but she was still dressed in a robe. She let me use her phone. And then she begged me to have coffee with her. She told me her father had just died and that she was in mourning. She told me about her husband, a corporation lawyer who was away most of the time. And she told me about her children. "I've lived for them," she said.

The room we were sitting in was elegant. "The softest rugs and carpets covered the floors. Rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows.

There were paintings selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls." That description is lifted from *The Awakening.* It occurs when Edna and Leonce Pontellier have returned to their house in New Orleans from the vacation on Grand Isle that takes up the first half of the book. The description might Just as well have been of the house in Long Island, or the houses in an upper-middleclass neighborhood I grew up in Philadelphia. I knew women like the Long Island woman while I was growing up. One was a teacher married to a neurosurgeon. Mrs. Stevens was the aunt of a friend of mine. What always struck me as odd was that while she had her own profession she said her real life was her husband and children-much as Adele Ratignolle, Edna's friend in *The Awakening,* says her life revolves around her husband and children. In her fifties Mrs. Stevens tried to commit suicide. Later she became ill. Now, she's bedridden.

Women like Mrs. Stevens were sustained in their lives by black women's labor. Black women reared such white women's children-fed them, sang to them, nurtured them. It is a black woman-a licensed practical nurse who made it to that Job from being a domestic for many years-who now nurses Mrs. Stevens. Mrs. Burden's life has been different from her employer's While Mrs. Stevens tragedy is rooted in the dependency on her family, and the lack of self-confidence that's bound up with such dependency, Mrs. Burden's life problems have to do with continuous toll and with two unhappy marriages to men who might have been like Janie's first two husbands in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Now, the reason I began with these sketches from my own experience is to point out that history has a long reach into our present lives, and to point out that the lives of white women and black women are intimately intertwined.

But let me come back to that and for the moment I'll turn to *The Awakening.* The reason I flashed on that morning in Long Island was because *The A wakening,* for all that it portrays Creole society and a round of group swims, parties, musicales, is a very solitary sort of book. It is about Edna's isolation, her imprisonment. She's imprisoned in her marriage. She's imprisoned in the house I described earlier. She's imprisoned as a possession, a display of her husband's wealth. But if *The Awakening* is about imprisonment, it's also about the possibilities of freedom. The foil for all the images of luxurious dalliance in the summer of Grand Isle, for all the images of household luxury, is one Chopin gives us at the beginning of the book. Edna describes a walk she took in her childhood in Kentucky through a meadow. "It seemed as big as an ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist.... My sunbonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it." Edna can see only straight ahead, neither to right nor left. The sunbonnet obstructs breadth of vision. The stretch of green goes on forever. There are no landmarks in such undifferentiated loveliness, no certain goal. Which reminds us that clear visions of liberation even forty or fifty years after Seneca Falls were very difficult if not impossible for most white middle-and upper-class women. There were those female fetters-fetters not just of clothing but of ideology-which foreclosed a world in which men like Leonce Pontellier and Robert Lebrun were free to come and go as they pleased....

The lack of productive work is historically significant. By 1899, when *The Awakening* was published, remunerated labor was not readily available to white women of Edna's class. Before the Civil War, the home was still a center of production, and upper-class white women really did have a role in that productivity. But by Edna's time the factory had taken over such production. Men like Leonce Pontellier were out in the world of industrial production, and captains of it Women like Edna were the ornaments that proved a man's success in business and the professions. It's out of such history that the white women's movement of the late sixties and early seventies put such a stress on the phrase "meaningful work."

But let's think about that phrase. Meaningful work. For black women like Mrs. Burden, work has been meaningful historically, but the meaning is very different from what I've been talking about. While Edna was being shut up in the parlor, the great grandmother of Mrs. Burden, Mrs. Stevens' nurse, and Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* were on the auction block. The black woman was colonized. The black woman had labor imposed on her. She was used for manual labor and house service. And there was that other kind of labor: she was "a breeder woman" And she was sexually exploited by the white men whose own wives were up there on the pedestal.

This is the background for what Janie's grandmother tells her at the beginning of the novel. She's caught Janie, in the midst of Janie's own sexual awakening, kissing Johnny Taylor over the fence. She slaps her, then she sits with Janie in her lap, and half-

weeping tells Janie why she wants her to get married, in a decent marriage, quickly. "De nigger woman is de mule of de world... Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do ... Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood sow and ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither... Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin on high but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Ah can't die easy thinkin maybe de men folks white or black is makin a spit cup outa you."

So Janie's nanny marries her off to the elderly Logan Killicks, who disgusts Janie sexually but who has a pedestal for her to stand on. To be precise, sixty acres of land and a nice house. When Joe Starks comes along down the road one day, Janie's attracted to his exuberance, his sweet talk, and a power she sees in him. So she goes off with him and marries him and for a while she lives vicariously off that power. But Joe, like Logan before him, considers Janie a possession. Like Logan, he wants her to work for, not with him. He loves what he calls her plentiful hair, but he makes her bind it up in a headrag while she minds his store He's your complete male supremacist. At one point Jame says to him, "You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin Ah see." "Dat's cause you need tellin," says Jody, "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows... they sho don't think none theirselves."

This marriage is ready for the dust bin. Like Edna, Janie's an accessory to her husband's position and work. But there are deep differences For one thing, Janie works in Jody's general store where she finds black folk who tell the tall tales, the "lies" Hurston loved and wrote about to reclaim the roots of a people. Janie gets sustenance from that company and that culture Just as Hurston did in the Eatonville where she grew up, and in her travels collecting material for her book on black folklore, for her novels, and for her books on voodoo. It's in Jody's store, not in solitary confinement, in that society among those black folk, that Janie makes her break with Jody. Someone's said she hasn't cut a plug of tobacco right. Jody says, "I god amight! A woman stay around uh store till she get as old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Dont stand dere rollin yo pop eyes at me wid yo rump hangin nearly to yo knees!" "Then, too," Hurston's narrator continues. "Janie took the middle of the floor ... 'Stop mixin up mah doins wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not... Ah aint no young gal no mo but den Ah aint no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But ahm a woman every inch of me and ah know it. Dats a whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but taint nothin to it but yo big voice. Humph! Talkin bout *me* lookin old! When you pull down you britches you look lak de change uh life. "Great God from Zion!' gasps a bystander, 'Y'll really playin the dozens tonight.' "

The dozens. A verbal artillery Edna doesn't have at her disposal. And there are other resources Edna doesn't have, which I'll return to in a moment. But for the minute I'll Just say that between the two awakenings we're talking about today, I prefer Janie's. It's a lot better than suicide. Janie awakens to what the meaning of a white, upper-class style of marriage is, and she rejects It She tells her friend Pheoby, "[My grandma] was borned in slavery ... sittin on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her.

Dat's whut she wanted for me ... Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She didn't have time to think whut tub do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin. De object wuz too get dere. So ah got up on de high stoollak she told me, but Pheoby. Ah done nearly languished tub death up dere Ah felt like de world wuz cryin' extry and Ah aint read de common news yet."

Janie comes down off the pedestal when she stands up to Jody. And finally she's her own woman, on her own, after he dies. She meets Tea Cake, and with him she finds both companionship and sexual fulfillment. He's a gambler, a guitar player Whites would call him shiftless. Hurston reclaims him, turns the stereotype against its creator. He should be a revelation to white readers. And so should Tea Cake and Janie's love, as opposed to all the stereotypes of black sexuality and marriage the Daniel Patrick Moymhans of this country have laid on us.

But if there's one thing that mars Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, it's Tea Cake's sometimes lingering feelings that he should be the boss. At one point he beats Janie. A friend says, "Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tub whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She just cries, eh Tea Cake? ... mah woman would spread her lungs all-over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out my jaw teeth ... git her good and mad, she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets."

But Janie has that sort of strength, too. She fights Jody physically when she discovers he's playing around with Nunkie. Now I think Janie's psychological and physical strength come, ironically, out of precisely the experience her nanny wants to forget. It was W. E. B. Du Bois who captured the contradiction of black women's forced labor when he said: "Our women in black had freedom thrust contemptuously upon them. With that freedom they are buying an untrammeled independence and dear as is the price they pay for it, it will in the end be worth every taunt and groan." At one point Hurston describes Janie and Tea Cake working side by side on the muck, picking beans: "All day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back made Janie popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on. Then Tea Cake would help get supper afterwards."

I don't think it's accidental that the work, the sexuality, and the housework get all mixed together by Hurston here. It's a glimpse of real equality between a man and a woman in marriage. It's the kind of marriage that's impossible for Edna. And it's a glimpse on the meshing of work and marriage so much of the contemporary white women's movement has stressed. The deep partnership so many of us yearn for. It's a good possibility *Their Eyes,* in part autobiography, was wish-fulfillment. For Hurston herself, a woman on her own at home in the world, in Eatonville, in New Orleans, in Haiti, amongst the intelligentsia of Harlem, had deep conflicts between her life and her career.

There is another contradiction in what I've been saying this morning. Something else that nags at me. It's that in the comparison I've been making, Edna comes off the weaker of the two women. To contemplate Janie-her resourcefulness, her fulfi11ment in marriage, the power of language at her disposal-to contemplate all this, and her sexuality, is to have a vicarious experience of real strength. This poses difficulties, since

finally my roots aren't in the tradition Hurston is writing out of For counterparts to Janie in white literature I must, then, turn perhaps not to Chopin's *The Awakening,* but to Colette's *The Vagabond,* or to Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook..*

Which is to raise a final question. What am I, a white feminist journalist and critic, doing talking about Hurston's work at all? Because she gives me not just vicarious strength, but also understanding. Never, for example, can I see women like Mrs. Stevens' nurse without thinking of women like Janie. Never can I speak With black women, working-or middle-class, without considering what I've learned of black life through writing like Hurston's.

Source: Ellen Cantarow, "Sex, Race, and Criticism: Thoughts of a White Feminist on Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Radical Teacher,* September, 1978, pp. 30-33.

# Adaptations

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been recorded on cassette in an abridged version by Caedmon. This recording, which came out in 1991, was performed by Ruby Dee.

In 1994, Recorded Books produced an unabridged recording of the novel on sound cassette, read by Michele-Denise Woods.

The movie rights to the novel are owned by Quincy Jones and Oprah Winfrey, although as of 1997 no film had yet been made.

# Topics for Further Study

Research the conditions under which southern blacks lived during the Great Depression and compare to the plight of migrant workers on the muck in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Research the feminist movement from the early twentieth century to today Based on your understanding of what a feminist was then and is now, argue whether Janie can or should be considered a feminist by contemporary scholars.

Study the relationships between wealthy white patrons and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and argue whether *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is meant to appeal to white readers of the time or is directed only at black readers.

Study the historic debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E B. DuBois and, based on your reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* create a response based on how you think Zora Neale Hurston would have responded to the fundamental issues of racial progress and race relations.

# Compare and Contrast

1920s and '30s: The numbers of unemployed African-Americans during the Great Depression was as much as 25% In northern cities, and well over 50% in many southern cities, figures that were three to four times higher than the number of unemployed whites.

Today: Unemployment among African-Americans averages between 10 and 11 %, higher than the 4 5 to 5% among whites.

1920s and '30s: Blues and jazz flourished from New Orleans to Harlem. Although these indigenous American music forms were the dominant mode of expression for the oppressed black culture, they also attracted a large audience of whites.

Today: Rap and hip-hop are the major musical forms that express the unique experiences of black culture In America's ghettos, but they also have many non-black fans, not only in America, but allover the world.

1920s and '30s: In the South, Jim Crow laws dictated that blacks and whites use separate drinking fountains, eat in separate restaurants, and learn in separate schools. In the North, although such laws did not exist, blacks were more subtly excluded from better jobs, schools, and neighborhoods, creating black ghettos in the major cities.

Today: Affirmative action plans to end discrimination In hiring have been in place for fifteen years Some people are now calling for their abolishment, claiming the goal has been achieved, while others believe there is still a long way to go.

1920s and '30s: Although many women writers participated in the Harlem Renaissance, they experienced the prejudice of their male counterparts, who excluded all but a chosen few of them from the anthologies and prestigious periodicals.

Today: African-American women Writers are experiencing their own "Renaissance," as represented by Tom Morrison's receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Most contemporary critics agree that some of the most important literature being produced today is by African-American women, many of whom claim a direct heritage from Zora Neale Hurston.

# What Do I Read Next?

A classic feminist novel, *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, follows a well-to-do white woman from Louisiana on a perilous path of self-discovery. The novel challenges the strict mores of a society that provides only one path of self-fulfillment for women, namely marriage and motherhood.

*The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E B DuBois is a classic document of African-American cultural history. In this collection of essays, DuBois articulates, among other things, his influential theory of "double consciousness," which describes how African-Americans wrestle between two identities as black and American.

*Mules and Men,* published in 1935, was Zora Neale Hurston's second book, and it was the first collection of black folklore published in America.

David Levering Lewis' *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981) is a classic historical study of the Harlem Renaissance. Lewis surveys all the major writers, artists, and intellectuals associated with the movement.

*The Bluest Eye(1970)* by Toni Morrison portrays a young black girl's obsession with blue eyes and blond hair. Having accepted society's definition of beauty as white, she has learned to despise her own black features, which leads to tragic consequences.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is a powerful depiction of how the oppressive environment of Chicago determines the fate of Bigger Thomas, a young black man who is doomed to act out the worst fears of racist whites.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Research the conditions under which southern blacks lived during the Great Depression and compare to the plight of migrant workers on the muck in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

2. Research the feminist movement from the early twentieth century to today.

Based on your understanding of what a feminist was then and is now, argue whether Janie can or should be considered a feminist by contemporary scholars.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Study the relationships between wealthy white patrons and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and argue whether Their Eyes Were Watching God is meant to appeal to white readers of the time or is directed only at black readers.

2. Study the historic debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B.

Du Bois and, based on your reading of Their Eyes Were Watching God, create a response based on how you think Zora Neale Hurston would have responded to the fundamental issues of racial progress and race relations that they discussed.

3. Although many women writers participated in the Harlem Renaissance, they experienced the prejudice of their male counterparts, who excluded all but a chosen few of them from the anthologies and prestigious periodicals.

How do these conditions compare to the reception women writers receive today?

# Literary Precedents

Hurston builds upon the rich tradition established by regional storytellers in the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century.

As white male predecessors Mark Twain, Josh Billings, Augustus B. Longstreet, and Artemus Ward do in their humorous sketches, Hurston chooses familiar regional settings as background; however, she does not settle for a superficial plot and stereotypical characters as do the raconteurs who draw their humor with broad strokes. Nor does she aim for social, political, and moral satire. She uses the cultural patterns and dialect of rural areas—western Florida, Eatonville in central Florida, and the Everglades in south Florida—to create a realistic story with believable characters. The regional setting itself adds to the local color as the writer depicts the communities surrounding Eatonville—Orlando, Winter Park, Maitland, Altamonte Springs, Sanford, Apopka—once-small towns that today are merged into a huge, sprawling metropolitan Orlando area. Into the fabric of regionalism and African-American heritage, with its black dialect, folklore, and cultural traditions, Hurston weaves threads of gender, social, and racial relationships. Consequently, Their Eyes Were Watching God has a depth unknown in earlier local color classics of the South and Southwest.

Rooted in the oral tradition of frontporch storytelling and gossiping, Their Eyes Were Watching God blossoms forth with its modern feminist themes of women's selfdiscovery and independence. In this respect, Janie is somewhat reminiscent of Kate Chopin's two protagonists, Louise Mallard in "The Story of an Hour" (1891) and Edna Pontellier in The Awakening (1899). The difference is that Janie succeeds in becoming free and self-assertive, having courageously survived two abusive husbands and a third gone mad. Writing some forty years after Chopin, Hurston thus broke the stereotype of having the victimized woman die at the end of the story.

Just five years before the publication of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston's contemporary (and later, friend) Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings set new precedents about a woman's journey to independence in her story "Gal Young Un" (1932). She depicts the middle-aged widow Mattie Syles, who triumphs over her opportunist husband, Trax Colton, interested only in Mattie's money. Rawlings, best known for The Yearling (1938), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel set in central Florida, portrays Mattie as strengthened by adversity. The woman remains "strong and whole. . . . fixed, deeprooted as the pine trees. They leaned a little, bent by an ancient storm. Nothing more could move them." This story might serve as a companion text for Hurston's novel, because Mattie, like Janie, changes from an intimidated wife into a self-assured woman.

Also, Mattie reaches out to "gal young un," similar to the way Janie helps her confidante Pheoby reach a higher level of selfknowledge.

With her contributions to both women's literature and black culture, Hurston became a major influence on the next generation of black feminist writers, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. In fact, Janie may be seen as a literary sister of Walker's Celie in

The Color Purple, and Walker has acknowledged that there is "no book more important to me" than Their Eyes Were Watching God. Instead of imitating literary predecessors, Hurston was revolutionary in the way she blazed new trails for black women writers.

# Further Study

Sharon Davie, "Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* in *PMLA,* May, 1993, pp. 446-459.

Scholarly article which examines the relationships among control, reason, and language in the novel

Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston,* Illinois, 1977. A popular biography of the Writer which includes a good discussion of her work and Its relationship to her life.

Karla F. C Holloway, *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender* in *Black Women's Literature,* Rutgers, 1992.

A book-length study which considers the work of several black women writers and several of Hurston's works in addition to *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Pearlie Peters, "Women and Assertive Voice in Hurston's Fiction and Folklore," in *The Literary Griot,* Spring/Fall, 1992, pp. 100-10.

An article which discusses the African-American oral tradition and its social significance.

Priscilla Wald, "Becoming 'Colored': The Self-Authorized Language of Difference in Zora Neale Hurston,'" in *American Literary History,* Spring, 1990, pp 79-100. Scholarly article which discusses Hurston's ability to be both the observer and the observed and which compares her fiction to her studies of folklore.

Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston. A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View,'" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 83-92.

An essay which discusses Walker's discovery of Hurston's work.

# Bibliography

Claire Crabtree, "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God," Southern Literary Journal,* Vol 17, no 2, Spring, 1985, pp. 54-66.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey,* Oxford, 1988.

Jennifer Jordon, "Feminist Fantasies, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God," Tulsa Studies* in *Women's Literature,* Vol. 7, Spring, 1988, pp. 105-17.

Alain Locke, review in *Opportunity,* June 1, 1938, reprinted in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K A Appiah, Amistad, 1993, p. 18.

Lucille Tompkins, review in *New York Times Book Review,* September 26, 1937, reprinted in *2ora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K A. Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp. 18-19. Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp 93-116.

Cheryl Wall, "Zora Neale Hurston Changing Her Own Words," in *2ora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K A Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp 78-97.

Mary Helen Washington, "'I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands" Emergent Female Hero," in *2ora Neale Hurston Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K A Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp.98-109.

Gay Wilentz, "Defeating the False God: Janie's Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer,* edited by Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien, Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 285-91.

Richard Wright, review in *New Masses,* October 5, 1937, reprinted in *2ora Neale Hurston Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K. A. Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp 16-17.

# Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

**Project Editor**
David Galens

**Editorial**
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

**Research**
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

**Data Capture**
Beverly Jendrowski

**Permissions**
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

**Imaging and Multimedia**
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

**Product Design**
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

**Manufacturing**
Stacy Melson



*For more information, contact*
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535