

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston

The Author

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is considered one of the pre-eminent writers of twentieth-century African-American literature. Hurston was closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance and has influenced such writers as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara.

In 1975, *Ms. Magazine* published Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" reviving interest in the author. Hurston's four novels and two books of folklore resulted from extensive anthropological research and have proven invaluable sources on the oral cultures of African America.

Through her writings, Robert Hemenway wrote in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, Hurston "helped to remind the Renaissance--especially its more bourgeois members--of the richness in the racial heritage."

Hurston says. . .

"Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place"

"I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and sword in my hands."

The Work

The main character, an African American woman in her early forties named Janie Crawford, tells the story of her life and journey via an extended flashback to her best friend, Pheoby, so that Pheoby can tell Janie's story to the nosy community on her behalf. Her life has three major periods corresponding to her marriages to three very different men.

Though beautiful and engaging, this novel is challenging because of the strong southern dialect Hurston uses to convey her story.

Questions

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about America?
2. Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's tale? What does this say about her character?
4. Hurston uses nature – the pear tree, the ocean, the horizon, the hurricane – not only as plot device but also as metaphor. How do they function as both?

5. The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?

6. Many readers consider the novel a coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each?

7. How important is Hurston's use of vernacular dialect to our understanding of Janie and the other characters and their way of life? What do speech patterns reveal about the quality of these lives and the nature of these communities?

9. What are the differences between the language of the men and that of Janie and the other women? How do the differences in language reflect the two groups' approaches to life, power, relationships, and self-realization? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?

10. What do the names of Janie's husbands – Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods – tell us about their characters and their relationships with Janie?

11. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning?

12. How do the imagery and tone of the last few pages of the novel connect with other moments in the novel? Does Janie's story end in triumph, despair, or a mixture of both?

13. What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?

14. How does Janie's journey – from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades – represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions?

15. To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice?

16. Why is adherence to tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?

22. After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her." Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others?