

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

FULL SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Janie Crawford, an attractive, confident, middle-aged Black woman, returns to Eatonville, Florida, after a long absence. The Black townspeople gossip about her and speculate about where she has been and what has happened to her young husband, Tea Cake. They take her confidence as aloofness, but Janie's friend Pheoby Watson sticks up for her. Pheoby visits her to find out what has happened. Their conversation frames the story that Janie relates.

Janie explains that her grandmother raised her after her mother ran off. Nanny loves her granddaughter and is dedicated to her, but her life as a slave and experience with her own daughter, Janie's mother, has warped her worldview. Her primary desire is to marry Janie as soon as possible to a husband who can provide security and social status for her. She finds a much older farmer named Logan Killicks and insists that Janie marry him.

After moving in with Logan, Janie is miserable. Logan is pragmatic and unromantic and, in general, treats her like a pack mule. One day, Joe Starks, a smooth-tongued and ambitious man, ambles down the road in front of the farm. He and Janie flirt in secret for a couple weeks before she runs off and marries him.

Janie and Jody, as she calls him, travel to all-Black Eatonville, where Jody hopes to have a “big voice.” A consummate politician, Jody soon succeeds in becoming the mayor, postmaster, storekeeper, and the biggest landlord in town. But Janie seeks something more than a man with a big voice. She soon becomes disenchanted with the monotonous, stifling life that she shares with Jody. She wishes that she could be a part of the rich social life in town, but Jody doesn’t allow her to interact with “common” people. Jody sees Janie as the fitting ornament to his wealth and power, and he tries to shape her into his vision of what a mayor’s wife should be. On the surface, Janie silently submits to Jody; inside, however, she remains passionate and full of dreams.

After almost two decades of marriage, Janie finally asserts herself. When Jody insults her appearance, Janie rips him to shreds in front of the townspeople, telling them all how ugly and impotent he is. In retaliation, he savagely beats her. Their marriage breaks down, and Jody becomes quite ill. After months without interacting, Janie visits him on his deathbed. Refusing to be silenced, she once again chastises him for the way that he treated her. As she berates him, he dies.

After Jody’s funeral, Janie feels free for the first time in years. She rebuffs various suitors who come to court her because she loves her newfound independence. But when Tea Cake, a man twelve years her junior, enters her life, Janie immediately senses a spark of mutual attraction. She begins dating Tea Cake despite critical gossip within the town. To

everyone's shock, Janie then marries Tea Cake nine months after Jody's death, sells Jody's store, and leaves town to go with Tea Cake to Jacksonville.

During the first week of their marriage, Tea Cake and Janie encounter difficulties. He steals her money and leaves her alone one night, making her think that he married her only for her money. But he returns, explaining that he never meant to leave her and that his theft occurred in a moment of weakness. Afterward, they promise to share all their experiences and opinions with each other. They move to the Everglades, where they work during the harvest season and socialize during the summer off-season. Tea Cake's quick wit and friendliness make their shack the center of entertainment and social life.

A terrible hurricane bursts into the Everglades two years after Janie and Tea Cake's marriage. As they desperately flee the rising waters, a rabid dog bites Tea Cake. At the time, Tea Cake doesn't realize the dog's condition; three weeks later, however, he falls ill. During a rabies--induced bout of madness, Tea Cake becomes convinced that Janie is cheating on him. He starts firing a pistol at her and Janie is forced to kill him to save her life. She is immediately put on trial for murder, but the all-white, all-male jury finds her not guilty. She returns to Eatonville where her former neighbors are ready to spin malicious gossip about her circumstances, assuming that Tea Cake has left her and taken her money. Janie wraps up her recounting to Pheoby, who is greatly impressed by

Janie's experiences. Back in her room that night, Janie feels at one with Tea Cake and at peace with herself.

CHARACTER LIST

Janie Mae Crawford

The protagonist of the novel. Janie defies categorization: she is black but flaunts her Caucasian-like straight hair, which comes from her mixed ancestry; she is a woman but defies gender stereotypes by insisting on her independence and wearing overalls. Behind her defiance are a curiosity and confidence that drive her to experience the world and become conscious of her relation to it. Part of Janie's maturity rests in her ability to realize that others' cruelty toward her or their inability to understand her stems not from malice but from their upbringing or limited perspective.

Tea Cake

Janie's third husband and first real love. Twelve years younger than Janie, Tea Cake impresses her with his quick wit and zest for living. But behind the flash, he has a real affection for, and understanding of, Janie. He doesn't try to force Janie to be anything other than herself, and he treats her with respect. He is not without faults, however; he does steal from her once and beat her. These reprehensible incidents, though, make him a more real character than one who possesses only idealized positive qualities.

Jody Starks

Janie's second husband. Joe Starks—or Jody, as Janie calls him—travels from Georgia to Eatonville to satisfy his ambition and hunger for power. A consummate politician and businessman, he becomes the postmaster, mayor, storekeeper, and biggest landlord in Eatonville. But he treats Janie as an object rather than a person, and their marriage deteriorates.

Logan Killicks

Janie's first husband. Nanny arranges Janie's marriage to Logan because she values financial security and respectability over love. Logan pampers Janie for a year before he tries to make her help him with the farming work. Feeling used and unloved, Janie leaves him for Jody Starks.

Pheoby Watson

Janie's best friend in Eatonville. Pheoby gives Janie the benefit of the doubt when the townspeople gossip viciously about Janie. She is the audience for Janie's story and her presence is occasionally felt in the colloquial speech that the narrator mixes in with a more sophisticated narrative style.

Nanny Crawford

Janie's grandmother. Nanny's experience as a slave stamped her worldview with a strong concern for financial security, respectability, and upward mobility. These values clash with Janie's independence and desire to experience the world, though Janie comes to respect Nanny's values and decisions as well intended.

Mr. and Mrs. Turner

Everglades residents who run a small restaurant. Mrs. Turner prides herself on her Caucasian features and disdains anyone with a more African appearance. She worships Janie because of Caucasian features. She cannot understand why a woman like Janie would marry a man as dark as Tea Cake, and she wants to introduce Janie to her brother.

Sam Watson

Pheoby's husband. Sam Watson is a source of great humor and wisdom during the conversations on Jody's porch. When a few Eatonville residents begin to express their resentment toward Jody, Sam acknowledges that Jody can be

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overbearing and commanding but points out that Jody is responsible for many improvements in the town.

Leafy Crawford

Janie's mother. Leafy was born shortly before the end of the Civil War and ran away after giving birth to Janie.

Amos Hicks

A resident of Eatonville, Florida. Hicks is one of the first people to meet Janie and Jody. He tries unsuccessfully to lure Janie away from Jody.

Motor Boat

One of Tea Cake and Janie's friends in the Everglades. Motor Boat flees the hurricane with them and weathers the storm in an abandoned house.

Hezekiah Potts

The delivery boy and assistant shopkeeper at Jody's store. After Jody's death, Hezekiah begins to mimic Jody's affectations.

Dr. Simmons

A friendly white doctor who is well known in the muck.

Johnny Taylor

A young man whom Janie kisses when she starts to feel sexual desires at age sixteen. This incident prompts Nanny to force Janie to marry the more socially respectable Logan Killicks.

Annie Tyler and Who Flung

A wealthy widow who lived in Eatonville, and her much younger fiancé, who took her money and fled at the first opportunity. Early in her marriage to Tea Cake, Janie fears that he will turn out to be like Who Flung and that she will end up like Annie Tyler.

Mr. and Mrs. Washburn

Nanny's employers after she became a free woman. Nanny lived in a house in the Washburn's backyard, and they helped raise Janie with their own children.

Nunkie

A girl in the Everglades who flirts relentlessly with Tea Cake. Janie grows extremely jealous of Nunkie, but after Tea Cake reassures her that Nunkie means nothing to him, Nunkie disappears from the novel.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON SOME TOPICS IN THE NOVEL

What does the title mean?

Hurston's title comes from Chapter 18 in which Janie and Tea Cake take shelter from the raging hurricane. Hurston writes that they waited to see how nature would determine their fate: "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." With this line, the characters recognize the lack of control they have over their own lives, and realize they can only be spared from the cruelty of nature if God sees fit to save them.

Why does Janie's grandmother encourage her to get married so young?

Nanny realizes Janie's blooming interest in sex when she spots her kissing a boy across the gate. Nanny decides that Janie's sexual awakening could lead to her downfall, so she pressures her into marrying Logan Killicks, despite her original wish that Janie go to school and "pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry." Nanny is most concerned that Janie will be left financially destitute if she dies before Janie can marry.

What is "the muck" where Janie and Tea Cake live?

The muck refers to the Everglades, a swampy part of Florida, where Tea Cake and Janie both labor as migrant workers. It symbolizes a kind of respite for Janie, not only because she and Tea Cake find happiness there, but because

everything surrounding the muck is “big and new,” which provides a welcome change from the gossiping, nosy neighbors Janie had become accustomed to.

How does Janie feel about Jody's death?

After Jody dies, Janie likes “being lonesome for a change.” While she is sorry that Jody suffered in his dying and feels “pity for the first time in years” for the way life “mishandled” him, Janie finally feels free from the oppression her marriage imposed upon her. Right after Jody's death, Janie tears her kerchief off her head to let her hair down, symbolizing the freedom she feels to be herself again.

Why is the porch important?

The novel begins and ends on Janie's porch in Eatonville, which represents the community in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While porch-sitters in the novel are often misogynistic or nosy gossipers, Janie's place on the porch with Pheoby is a reminder that she has a place to tell her story. Pheoby's “hungry listening” depicts the porch as a safe place where Janie can be in control of the details of her own life.

What are the personal histories of Nanny, Janie's grandmother, and of Janie's mother?

Nanny, Janie's grandmother, was born into slavery and had a child, Janie's mother, by a white master. After her master died, Nanny took her daughter and ran away because the master's widow threatened to sell Janie's mother. After slaves were freed at the end of the Civil War, Nanny “got with some good white people” and moved to West Florida. She raised Leafy, Janie's mother, and made sure she received a good education. However, Leafy was raped by a white schoolmaster and began drinking, leaving Nanny to bring up Janie.

Who were Janie's three husbands?

Janie's first husband was an older man, Logan Killicks. The marriage began with an arrangement by Nanny, Janie's grandmother, and ended when Janie left with

Joe Starks, her second husband. The marriage to Joe Starks ended when Starks died. Janie's third husband was Vergible Woods, or Tea Cake. The marriage began when Janie sold Joe's store and moved to Jacksonville with Tea Cake. The marriage ended when Janie killed Tea Cake in self-defense.

What role does Janie's physical appearance play in the novel?

Janie's beauty makes her husbands and other men fall in love with her. Her light skin and long, wavy hair make some people, including African Americans, think of her as higher in status. Mrs. Turner, for example, tries to break up Janie's marriage to the darker-skinned Tea Cake so that Janie will marry Mrs. Turner's brother. Mrs. Turner's manipulations help spread false rumors that Janie is unfaithful to Tea Cake, and these rumors make some people accuse Janie of murder. Janie's light skin color is also one reason the white jury acquits her of murder. A Black onlooker remarks, "Aw you know dem white mens wuzn't gointuh do nothin' to no woman dat look lak her."

Why is Jody Starks a natural leader?

Jody Starks is a "citified, stylishly dressed man" who walks "like he knew where he was going." Jody's self-confidence is bolstered by his having money and by acquiring Janie, a beautiful wife. Jody is also ambitious and willing to work hard and dream big. Upon arriving in Eatonville, he says, "Ah means tuh put my hands tuh de plow heah, and strain every nerve tuh make dis our town de metropolis uh de state." Jody is smart with money; he buys and resells land quickly, sets up a store, and even provides Eatonville with a street lamp. Jody's energy and good ideas make others want to please and follow him.

How does Jody treat Janie?

Jody Starks treats Janie well in some ways: He builds her a big house and gives her nice clothes, and she gets the respect due to the wife of the mayor. However, Jody is also very domineering and jealous. He makes Janie cover her hair so other men can't see it. Jody also orders Janie around and criticizes her in

front of others. Janie resents his treatment and copes with her anger by keeping up outward appearances and retreating into herself: "She had an inside and outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them."

Why are people in Eatonville scandalized by the romance between Janie and Tea Cake?

People in Eatonville are scandalized by Janie and Tea Cake's romance for several reasons. Janie is "nearly twelve years older" than Tea Cake. Janie is a well-off widow who owns a house and a store, while Tea Cake "can't do nothin' but help her spend whut she got." The Eatonville neighbors are sure Tea Cake only wants Janie's money. In addition, they criticize Janie for wearing bright colors and disrespecting the memory of her dead husband. The people of Eatonville also know that Tea Cake is a gambler, a fact Janie does not discover until after they are married.

How do Janie and Tea Cake support themselves while they are in the Everglades?

Janie and Tea Cake go down to the Everglades to get work harvesting beans, and Tea Cake also earns money through gambling. "Between de beans and de dice Ah can't lose," Tea Cake says. In addition, Janie and Tea Cake put food on the table by hunting and fishing. They also hunt alligators to "sell the hides and teeth in Palm Beach."

How does Janie interact with the women she meets in the Everglades?

At first, the other women think of Janie as "a special case on the muck. It was generally assumed that she thought herself too good to work like the rest of the women." After Janie starts picking beans with them, the other women begin to accept her. Janie happily joins the crowd around Tea Cake, but she feels jealousy toward a younger woman with whom Tea Cake flirts. Janie also becomes "visiting friends" with Mrs. Turner, a woman who equates Janie's light skin with superior class and wants Janie to leave Tea Cake and take up with her

brother. Mrs. Turner's attitude highlights the differences between Janie and the other women in the Everglades. Janie is never really accepted by them, a fact that becomes clear after Tea Cake's death.

Why does Janie kill Tea Cake?

Janie kills Tea Cake to save her own life. A few weeks before, Tea Cake was bitten while rescuing Janie from an angry dog during the hurricane. Tea Cake gets sick, but by the time a doctor sees him and recognizes that the dog has infected Tea Cake with rabies, it is too late. Tea Cake gets sicker and more violent and starts imagining that Janie is cheating on him, so he sleeps with a pistol. Janie loads a rifle to protect herself in case Tea Cake becomes violent. Finally, out of his mind, Tea Cake shoots at Janie, and she kills him in self-defense.

After she returns to Eatonville, how does Janie let people know what has happened to her in her absence?

Janie doesn't talk directly to her neighbors but instead tells her story to Pheoby Watson, her best friend. Then Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell the others. Janie knows the neighbors will not understand that she loved Tea Cake. But she asks Pheoby to tell them, "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore."

Why is Janie initially attracted to Jody? Why does this attraction fade?

Jody comes along at a transitional period in Janie's life. She is still partially under the spell of her grandmother's philosophy, prizing material wealth and status, but at the same time has begun to search for something greater. She is unsure what that something is but knows that it involves more than what she has with Logan Killicks. When Jody arrives, full of bluster and ambition, he reconciles Janie's upbringing with her desire for adventure. His talk of power

and conquest soothes Janie's disenchantment while his ambitious social climbing satisfies the values that Nanny has imparted to her.

Janie's interest in Jody ultimately wanes because she discovers that the role he wants her to fit offers her no fulfillment. She learns that there are two reasons that Jody will never help her achieve her dreams. First, Jody's quest is for material and social gain. He wants wealth, power, and status. No accumulation of such things, however, will help Janie in her spiritual quest. Second, Jody defines himself through his control of others, especially through his silencing of Janie. Their marriage fails because Janie refuses to tolerate Jody's inflated sense of himself any longer. His egotism, based on power over others, demands that he control and dominate Janie, which prevents her from exploring and expressing herself.

THEMES

Language: Speech and Silence

Their Eyes Were Watching God is most often celebrated for Hurston's unique use of language, particularly her mastery of rural Southern Black dialect. Throughout the novel, she utilizes an interesting narrative structure, splitting the presentation of the story between high literary narration and idiomatic discourse. The long passages of discourse celebrate the culturally rich voices of Janie's world; these characters speak as do few others in American literature, and their distinctive grammar, vocabulary, and tone mark their individuality. Hurston's use of language parallels Janie's quest to find her voice. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in the afterword to most modern editions of the book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is primarily concerned "with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment."

Jody stifles Janie's speech, as when he prevents her from talking after he is named mayor; her hatred of him stems from this suppression of her individuality. Tea Cake, on the other hand, engages her speech, conversing with her and putting himself on equal terms with her; her love for him stems from his respect for her individuality. After Janie discovers her ability to define herself by her speech interactions with others, she learns that silence too can be a source of empowerment; having found her voice, she learns to control it. Similarly, the narrator is silent in conspicuous places, neither revealing why Janie isn't upset with Tea Cake's beating nor disclosing her words at the trial. In terms of both the form of the novel and its thematic content, Hurston places great emphasis on the control of language as the source of identity and empowerment.

Power and Conquest as Means to Fulfillment

Whereas Janie struggles to assert a place for herself by undertaking a spiritual journey toward love and self-awareness, Jody attempts to achieve fulfillment through the exertion of power. He tries to purchase and control everyone and everything around him; he exercises his authority hoping to subordinate his environment to his will. He labors under the illusion that he can control the world around him and that, by doing so, he will achieve some sense of profound fulfillment. Others exhibit a similar attitude toward power and control; even Tea Cake, for example, is filled with hubris as the hurricane whips up, certain that he can survive the storm through his mastery of the muck. For both Jody and Tea Cake, the natural world reveals the limits of human power. In Jody's case, as disease sets in, he begins to lose the illusion that he can control his world; the loss of authority over Janie as she talks back to him furthers this disillusionment. In Tea Cake's case, he is forced to flee the hurricane and struggles to survive the ensuing floods. This limit to the scope of

one's power proves the central problem with Jody's power-oriented approach toward achieving fulfillment: ultimately, Jody can neither stop his deterioration nor silence Janie's strong will.

Love and Relationships versus Independence

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of how Janie achieves a strong sense of self and comes to appreciate her independence. But her journey toward enlightenment is not undertaken alone. The gender differences that Hurston espouses require that men and women provide each other things that they need but do not possess. Janie views fulfilling relationships as reciprocal and based on mutual respect, as demonstrated in her relationship with Tea Cake, which elevates Janie into an equality noticeably absent from her marriages to Logan and Jody.

Although relationships are implied to be necessary to a fulfilling life, Janie's quest for spiritual fulfillment is fundamentally a self-centered one. She is alone at the end yet seems content. She liberates herself from her unpleasant and unfulfilling relationships with Logan and Jody, who hinder her personal journey. Through her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie experiences true fulfillment and enlightenment and becomes secure in her independence. She feels a deep connection to the world around her and even feels that the spirit of Tea Cake is with her. Thus, even though she is alone, she doesn't feel alone.

Humanity vs. Nature

Their Eyes Were Watching God illustrates how no human pursuits—for love, money, or self-worth—can stand against God or the forces of nature. For much of the novel, characters operate under the assumption that they control their own destiny: Jody plays God after his appointment as mayor; Tea Cake refuses to believe the impending storm is reason to abandon a full day's wages; Janie marries hastily in pursuit of fulfilling her girlhood dream of a perfect union. The

hurricane that devastates Janie and Tea Cake—eventually causing Tea Cake’s death—is a force of pure destruction, controlled and restrained by no man, and certainly not by Janie or Tea Cake.

The title of the book, taken from when the characters huddle against the hurricane and hope to survive, serves as another reminder of this theme: humanity against the supernatural. As Janie and Tea Cake sit in metaphorical company with the people in surrounding shanties, they are all united in their supplication toward God. Through this shared petition to the divine, the novel suggests that a sort of horrific communion occurs when humanity is pitted against threatening forces of destruction. Specifically, Janie and Tea Cake draw closer in this communion, surviving the hurricane to “stand on the edge of things,” hand-in-hand.

SYMBOLS

Hair

Janie’s hair is a symbol of her power and unconventional identity; it represents her strength and individuality in three ways. First, it represents her independence and defiance of petty community standards. The town’s critique at the very beginning of the novel demonstrates that it is considered undignified for a woman of Janie’s age to wear her hair down. Her refusal to bow down to their norms clearly reflects her strong, rebellious spirit.

Second, her hair functions as a phallic symbol; her braid is constantly described in phallic terms and functions as a symbol of a typically masculine power and potency, which blurs gender lines and thus threatens Jody.

Third, her hair, because of its straightness, functions as a symbol of whiteness; Mrs. Turner worships Janie because of her straight hair and other Caucasian characteristics. Her hair contributes to the normally white male power that she

wields, which helps her disrupt traditional power relationships (male over female, white over Black) throughout the novel.

The Pear Tree and the Horizon

The pear tree and the horizon represent Janie's idealized views of nature. In the bees' interaction with the pear tree flowers, Janie witnesses a perfect moment in nature, full of erotic energy, passionate interaction, and blissful harmony. She chases after this ideal throughout the rest of the book. Similarly, the horizon represents the far-off mystery of the natural world, with which she longs to connect. Janie's hauling in of her horizon "like a great fish-net" at the end of the novel indicates that she has achieved the harmony with nature that she has sought since the moment under the pear tree.

The Hurricane

The hurricane represents the destructive fury of nature. As such, it functions as the opposite of the pear tree and horizon imagery: whereas the pear tree and horizon stand for beauty and pleasure, the hurricane demonstrates how chaotic and capricious the world can be. The hurricane makes the characters question who they are and what their place in the universe is. Its impersonal nature—it is simply a force of pure destruction, lacking consciousness and conscience—makes the characters wonder what sort of world they live in, whether God cares about them at all, and whether they are fundamentally in conflict with the world around them. In the face of the hurricane, Janie and the other characters wonder how they can possibly survive in a world filled with such chaos and pain.

SOME ESSAYS

Historical Context Essay: The Harlem Renaissance

Zora Neale Hurston played a significant role in the Harlem Renaissance, a period in the early 20th century in which the New York neighborhood of Harlem

became a Black cultural mecca. Black writers, visual artists, musicians, actors, and other cultural figures flocked to the area and created works of art that celebrated the survival of African-Americans, as well as the community's potential to rebirth the arts. The seeds of the Renaissance were planted when the Great Migration occurred, a time in which millions of African-Americans moved from the South to the North, often settling in Harlem, which most white families abandoned. By the 1920s, Harlem was firmly established as a vibrant and thriving Black community. The now-famous artists who joined it—including Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, and Hurston—influenced each other in the creation of masterpieces of Black art.

Central Idea Essay: Is Tea Cake a Good or Bad Person?

Not long after Jody's death, Janie marries Tea Cake, and soon realizes that he has many concerning traits. He steals the money she hides from him, spends it entertaining other women, and gambles in an illegal and dangerous dice game to get it back for her. Tea Cake's principal concern is for himself, and he often disguises his selfishness under the guise of love for Janie. For example, when they move to the Everglades to work on the muck, Tea Cake tells Janie she "betta come git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women," claiming he misses her too much to go a full work-day without her.

One of his most concerning traits is the jealousy he allows to cloud his judgment, resulting in him physically assaulting Janie to relieve "the awful fear inside him" when a potential suitor visits the muck. Tea Cake's egotism prevents Janie from being a truly equal partner in their relationship, which desecrates the vision of perfect unity she has attached to marriage since her pear tree revelation.

Despite many examples of reckless behavior, Tea Cake's motivation could also be interpreted as purer and more child-like than it appears at first glance, and Janie actually has quite a bit of autonomy in their relationship. In describing her new love to Pheoby, Janie claims "Tea Cake ain't draggin' me off nowhere Ah don't want tuh go." After two soured marriages, Janie knows what she wants and makes her choice to marry Tea Cake fully informed of the risks involved. Tea Cake makes a habit of showering Janie with praise, and while his exact intentions cannot be certain, the reader sees Janie's love grow for him each time, often "allowing their bodies to express the inexpressible," physically communicating a love she never felt for Logan or Jody.

Hurston depicts Tea Cake as not simply a good or bad person, but instead as a real person who is complicated and not easily understood. At times, Tea Cake is motivated by pride, as when he refuses to leave the Everglades at first sign of the impending hurricane, prioritizing money over safety for Janie. However, in the middle of the storm, Tea Cake saves Janie from a rabid dog, ultimately sacrificing his own life in this act of love-driven heroism. After his death, Tea Cake's memory remains unsoiled for Janie, and she believes he can never be fully dead "until she herself ha[s] finished feeling and thinking." All in all, Tea Cake is a complicated man who is beloved by Janie and cannot fall into easy categories such as "good" or "bad."

Discuss the idea of the horizon in the What does it symbolize for Janie?

The horizon in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" symbolizes Janie's aspirations, dreams, and quest for equality within marriage. Initially, Janie views the horizon as a distant place of hope and new beginnings, seeking love and change in her relationships. The horizon represents her desire to break free from oppressive situations, such as her marriage to Joe Starks, where she feels confined and

silenced. Janie's perception of the horizon evolves throughout the novel, reflecting her journey towards self-realization and independence.

Moreover, the horizon serves as a metaphor for Janie's pursuit of personal growth and fulfillment beyond societal constraints. It embodies endless possibilities, boundless potential, and the eternal quest for self-discovery.

Janie's shifting perspectives on the horizon mirror her evolving understanding of love, freedom, and individuality, culminating in her ability to redefine her own horizons and embrace her true self.

In essence, the horizon in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" symbolizes Janie's journey towards empowerment, liberation, and the realization of her innermost desires and aspirations, highlighting the theme of personal growth, independence, and the pursuit of authentic self-expression.

Zora Neale Hurston and Their Eyes Were Watching God

Background

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, to John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher, and Lucy Potts Hurston, a former schoolteacher. Hurston was the fifth of eight children, and while she was still a toddler, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-Black incorporated town in the United States, where John Hurston served several terms as mayor. In 1917, Hurston enrolled in Morgan Academy in Baltimore, where she completed her high school education.

Three years later, she enrolled at Howard University and began her writing career. She took classes there intermittently for several years and eventually earned an associate degree. The university's literary magazine published her first story in 1921. In 1925, she moved to New York and became a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance. A year later, she, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman organized the journal *Fire!*, considered one of the defining

publications of the era. Meanwhile, she enrolled in Barnard College and studied anthropology with arguably the greatest anthropologist of the twentieth century, Franz Boas. Hurston's life in Eatonville and her extensive anthropological research on rural Black folklore greatly influenced her writing. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, long after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. The literature of the 1920s, a period of postwar prosperity, was marked by a sense of freedom and experimentation, but the 1930s brought the Depression and an end to the cultural openness that had allowed the Harlem Renaissance to flourish. As the Depression worsened, political tension increased within the United States; cultural production came to be dominated by "social realism," a gritty, political style associated with left-wing radicalism. The movement's proponents felt that art should be primarily political and expose social injustice in the world. This new crop of writers and artists dismissed much of the Harlem Renaissance as bourgeois, devoid of important political content and thus devoid of any artistic merit. The influential and highly political Black novelist Richard Wright, then an ardent Communist, wrote a scathing review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* upon its publication, claiming that it was not "serious fiction" and that it "carries no theme, no message, no thought."

Hurston was also criticized for her comportment: she refused to bow to gender conventions, and her behavior often seemed shocking if not outrageous. Although she won a Guggenheim Fellowship and had published prolifically (both works of fiction and anthropological works), Hurston fell into obscurity for a number of years. By the late 1940s, she began to have increasing difficulty getting her work published. By the early 1950s, she was forced to work as a maid. In the 1960s, the counterculture revolution continued to show disdain for

any literature that was not overtly political, and Zora Neale Hurston's writing was further ignored.

A stroke in the late 1950s forced Hurston to enter a welfare home in Florida. After she died penniless on January 28, 1960, she was buried in an unmarked grave. Alice Walker, another prominent African-American writer, rediscovered her work in the late 1960s. In 1973, Walker traveled to Florida to place a marker on Hurston's grave containing the phrase, "A Genius of the South." Walker's 1975 essay, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," published in *Ms.* magazine, propelled Hurston's work back into vogue. Since then, Hurston's opus has been published and republished many times; it has even been adapted for the cinema: Spike Lee's first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It*, parallels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and can be viewed as an interesting modern adaptation of the novel.

One of the strengths of Hurston's work is that it can be studied in the context of a number of different American literary traditions. Most often, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is associated with Harlem Renaissance literature, even though it was published in a later era, because of Hurston's connection to that scene. Certain aspects of the book, though, make it possible to discuss it in other literary contexts. For example, some critics argue that the novel should be read in the context of American Southern literature: with its rural Southern setting and its focus on the relationship between man and nature, the dynamics of human relationships, and a hero's quest for independence, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fits well into the tradition that includes such works as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

The novel is also important in the continuum of American feminist literature, comparing well to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. More specifically, and due in

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large part to Alice Walker's essay, Zora Neale Hurston is often viewed as the first in a succession of great American Black women writers that includes Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor. But *Their Eyes Were Watching God* resists reduction to a single movement, either literary or political. Wright's criticism from is, to a certain extent, true: the book is not a political treatise—it carries no single, overwhelming message or moral. Far from being a weakness, however, this resistance is the secret of the novel's strength: it is a profoundly rich, multifaceted work that can be read in a number of ways.