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A Woman's Catch-22 in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* follows the life of Janie as she struggles through her marriages and disillusionments of life as a woman. Each marriage is unique in its problems. Janie's marriage to Logan in particular highlights the struggles of labor in marriage, and in doing so, reveals two facets of sexism. The first facet is the gender-based division of labor that pressures women into unpaid domestic work and men into paid, bread-winning positions. The second facet of sexism is the devaluation and belittlement of the tasks society has labeled feminine. These facets work together to form the catch-22 women like Janie often find themselves in where they face shame and pressure whether they refuse to take on domestic labor or decide to partake in domestic labor. As a result, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates how patriarchal societies based in gender-roles can cause conflict in womens' identities and leave them in a state of unfulfillment as they struggle with these conflicting messages.

In the first few chapters of the novel, Janie faces a sudden shift in character as a result of the pressure to perform domestic work. The novel revolves around the metaphor of the pear tree which represents Janie's outlook on life: "*Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered*, things enjoyed, things done and undone, Dawn and doom was in the branches" (Hurston 8). Janie yearns for experiences. The phrase "things done an undone" encompasses all that life has to offer. Janie's desire for new experiences is emphasized through her horizons

metaphor: “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” (Hurston 89). Janie claims that Nanny had taken the horizon from her. Nanny was the one who pressured Janie into marriage, and therefore, the one who confined Janie to the repetitive life of a wife limited to the whim of her husband. When Janie learned that she was to marry Killicks, she saw Killicks “desecrating the pear tree,” and therefore, the endless possibilities of life (Hurston 14).

Nanny’s desire for Janie to marry is not a unique situation as Nanny made this decision based on societal constructs that cause women to have to marry in order to have comfort and protection: “’Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (Hurston 15). Nanny fears that once she dies there would be no one to look after Janie leaving marriage as her only option for survival (Hurston 15). Nanny goes on to tell her story of her struggles as an unmarried black woman and former slave with a child (Hurston 16-20). Nanny tells Janie how her mother Leafy was raped by a school teacher after Nanny insisted on putting her in school so that she can form a career as a school teacher (Hurston 19). The implication here is that Nanny blames herself for the attack, and therefore, to help Janie form a career would be a mistake that would put her in harm’s way. In order to avoid that mistake, Nanny desires Janie to marry and be under the protection of a husband.

Disillusioned with her marriage, Janie abandons her old ideals and conforms to the repetitive life of domestic labor: “The familiar people and things failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (Hurston 25). The image of a road conjures up an image of an obstructed view which would imply that as Janie was looking “up the road towards way off,” she was specifically looking towards the horizon, one of the metaphors

for Janie's ideal life (Hurston 25). Janie feels failed by Nanny because she insisted that she marry, so Janie now must reconsider her old dream. This prompts her to think about the pear tree, and how marriage "does not make love," such as the love she sees in the pear tree: "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" (Hurston 11, 25). After reconsidering her old dream, Janie has no other choice but to become what society expects of her as a woman, a domestic laborer. This is a role that Janie decides to take seriously, and it is one that she has to defend.

Throughout her marriage to Killicks, Janie struggles to maintain the role she was pressured into as a woman due to her husband devaluing and belittling her labor. It is evident that while Killicks recognizes the value of his labor, he fails to recognize the value of domestic labor which ensures that he is fed, his clothes are clean, and the home is livable. Logan's perception of masculinity and femininity appears to be a factor in Logan's perception of labor. Logan places traditionally masculine labor as being higher in value than traditionally feminine labor when he speaks to Janie about bringing in the wood herself. Logan mentions that his first wife would "sling chips lak uh man" (Hurston 26). Logan is comparing to Janie to his first wife and using his first wife's higher level of masculinity as the qualifier that makes her more valuable than Janie.

Logan often uses phrases that imply that Janie's work is easy and/or worthless. When Logan says "'Tain't no use in foolin' round in dat kitchen all day long," the use of the word "foolin'" implies that Janie's work in the kitchen is nonessential when in reality she is performing essential, but unpaid, labor (Hurston 31). Furthermore, when Logan says, "all day long," this implies that Janie's work inside the kitchen alone is an endeavor that takes up hours of Janie's time just as working in the fields would most likely take up a considerable amount of

Logan's time. When Logan asks Janie to cut up the potatoes while he gets a second mule, so Janie could spend even more time in the field, the novel specifies that Janie had to finish up indoors before moving on to the labor outdoors which emphasizes that she was already preoccupied (Hurston 27). The text takes care to specify that Janie would walk out of the kitchen whenever Logan called her (Hurston 26, 31). When Logan asks her to help him with the manure pile, the novel details how Janie was only "halfway done" with making breakfast, even specifying how she "walked to the door with the pan in her hand still stirring" (Hurston 31). The fact that Janie did not stop her task to listen to Logan demonstrates how preoccupied she already was with her current task. The novel goes on to describe Janie's tasks in the kitchen which reveals how many tasks Janie has to juggle including making cornbread, sow-belly, hoe-cake, and coffee (Hurston 32). The descriptions of these tasks are embedded within descriptions of Janie's reflections on Logan (Hurston 32). This creates a sense of preoccupancy which highlights Janie's busyness, a sharp contrast with Logan's perception of her labor. Logan's devaluation of Janie's labor carries negative consequences for Janie because it causes him to expect Janie to take on more labor without lessening her previous responsibilities. He believes that Janie has the time to take on field work when she in fact does not. The result is an environment that overworks women without any expectation for men to take on any domestic work themselves because such work is devalued to the point of being perceived as nonessential and non-laborious.

This catch-22 is well summed up when Janie tells Logan, "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine" (Hurston 31). Janie resorts to appealing to traditional gender roles as an argument for why she cannot stop working to help Logan in the field despite previously objecting to that monotonous life. Janie has been broken down by society only to be shamed by her husband for fulfilling the role she was pressured to perform. It

is not until Janie feels a “sudden newness and change” that she finally decides to reject her life as a domestic laborer, as symbolized through the throwing of her apron, and marry Joe who spoke of horizons (Hurston 29, 32). Janie swears to herself: “From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything… Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now” (Hurston 32). Janie maintains her old ideals throughout the novel, but as a result, she will now struggle in her marriage with Joe to maintain her true self while being pressured to perform her unfulfilling duty as the mayor’s wife.

Works Cited

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.