

## **Reading Guide for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a “coming of age” story focusing on the life of Janie Crawford, a young girl and later a middle aged woman who grows up and comes of age in the rural South sometime between the 1890s and 1920s. The chronology of Janie’s life begins in southern, rural Georgia but then moves to Eatonville, Florida; then the Florida Everglades, and finally back to Eatonville. Early chapters also take the reader back into the histories of Janie’s mother and grandmother, the latter who was once a slave. As a reader, you would be very wise to keep the historical context in mind as you examine the various obstacles that Janie must overcome as she attempts to define herself throughout her life. Zora Neale Hurston wrote the novel in the 1930s while she was doing anthropological research in Haiti. It was published in 1937.

According to Susan Hader, “*Bildungsroman* denotes a novel of all-around self-development. Used generally, it encompasses a few similar genres: the *Entwicklungsroman*, a story of general growth rather than self-culture; the *Erziehungsroman*, which focuses on training and formal education; and the *Kunstlerroman*, about the development of an artist. (*The Space Between*, 13).” Hader discusses “the *Bildungsroman* genre as a whole and how it applies to all three. [Her] definition of *Bildungsroman* is a distilled version of the one offered by Marianne Hirsch in *The Novel of Formation as Genre*:”

1. A *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, **the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order**. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a **"search for meaningful existence within society."**
2. To spur the protagonist on his or her journey, **some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.**
3. The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of **repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order.**
4. Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order may become manifest in various forms of “discontent” of the protagonist, who is either forced to conform to social conventions, or who rejects society’s spirit and values in order to live a life which is fulfilling and meaningful. The coming-of-age novel ends with a deep self-assessment by the protagonist, and this self assessment will often reveal various forms of societal weakness, deficiency, hypocrisy or moral corruption.

So, as you read, consider these questions:

- What forms of “discontent” are evident early in Janie’s relationship with Nanny?
- What forms of “discontent” are evident in Janie’s relationship with Logan?
- What forms of “discontent” are evident in Janie’s relationship with Joe?
- What forms of “discontent” are evident in Janie’s relationships with the citizens of Eatonville, with the men who pursue her before and after Joe’s death?
- What forms of “discontent” are evident in Janie’s relationship with Mrs. Turner?
- What forms of “discontent” are evident in Janie’s relationship with some of Tea Cake’s male “friends”?
- What specific needs are not being met in Janie’s relationship with Nanny?
- What specific needs are not being met in Janie’s relationship with Logan?
- What specific needs are not being met in Janie’s relationship with Joe?
- What specific needs are not being met in Janie’s relationship with Mrs. Turner?

- What specific needs are not being met in Janie's relationships with some of Tea Cake's "friends" or many of the people she meets on the muck?
- What forms of "discontent" are evident in Janie's relationship with many of the women who attend her murder trial?
- What specific "unbending" views, values, and attitudes within Janie's society "clash" with Janie's desires?
- What specific aspects of Janie's society are corrupt, deficient, hypocritical, weak, or problematic? Keep in mind that Janie lives in several different societies throughout the novel.

## Questions for Chapters 1-10

1. According to Hurston in the opening paragraphs of the novel, how do men treat their dreams in contrast to women?
2. In the beginning of the novel, Janie has just returned from doing what?
3. What kind of clothing is Janie wearing at the beginning of the novel?
4. How is Janie wearing her hair?
5. What are the details mentioned in the answers to questions 4 and 5 intended to suggest about Janie's character?
6. What does Hurston mean at the beginning of the chapter when she says the men of Eatonville were "saving with the mind what they lost with the eye"?
7. According to Sam Watson, why do many of the people of Eatonville look forward to the Day of Judgment?
8. According to Hurston, what is the oldest human longing?
9. What is the "muck"?
10. In what kind of family was Janie raised?
11. Why did Janie believe she was white?
12. How did Janie learn for the first time in her life that she was not white?
13. Why and how did Johnny Taylor upset Nanny?
14. What specific episode marked the end of Janie's childhood?
15. Why did Nanny favor Logan Killicks over Johnny Taylor?
16. What does the narrator mean when she says "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree"?
17. Why did Nanny violently slap Janie's face?
18. According to Nanny, who or what is the "mule uh de world"?
19. Why does Nanny claim that (answer to #17) is the "mule uh the world"?
20. How does Nanny's background and history lead her to respect and admire somebody like Logan Killicks?
21. Why was Nanny whipped when she was younger?
22. How was Janie conceived?
23. What were Nanny's final words before she died?
24. How did Janie react to the physical appearance of Logan Killicks?
25. Under what circumstances did Janie first come to meet Jody?
26. How did Janie silence Hicks the first time he tried to flirt with her?
27. What item did Joe Starks buy from Sears and Roebuck that helped advance his fame in the town of Eatonville?
28. What did Joe Starks' house look like?
29. What special item did Joe buy for Janie that made other people feel that Joe had taken advantage of them?

30. Why did Joe make Henry Pitts leave town?
31. Why did the citizens of Eatonville frequently make fun of Matt Bonner?
32. What did Joe force Janie to wear while she worked in the store?
33. Why did he make her wear this?
34. Why did Janie once compare her husband to Abe Lincoln and George Washington?
35. Why wouldn't Jody allow Janie to attend a mule's funeral?
36. Why did Jody strike Janie for the first time?
37. What kind of ritual did Joe Starks go through with Mrs. Robbins?
38. Approximately how old was Janie when she began to entertain the idea of running out on Joe?
39. How did Joe Starks change physically as he began to age?
40. What circumstances led Joe to strike Janie the second time -- the time that "drove her from the store"?
41. Why did Joe start to see a "root-doctor"?
42. What rumors were the people of Eatonville spreading about Janie's treatment of her husband?
43. Why did the word "kidney" force Janie to think about death?
44. According to Janie, what did Joe Starks always deny her the opportunity to use?
45. What does Janie see in the looking glass at the end of chapter 8?
46. Why do scores of men begin to offer their services to Janie at the beginning of chapter 9?
47. Who was Hezekiah and how did he treat Janie?
48. What kind of relationship developed between Phoeby Watson, Janie, and the Sanford undertaker?
49. Who was Vergible Woods?
50. What specific circumstances led Vergible Woods to Janie?

## **Chapters 11-20**

51. In what specific ways was Tea Cake a different sort of man in contrast to Logan Killicks and Jody?
52. How old was Tea Cake and how old was Janie when they first met?
53. When Janie and Tea Cake first met, Tea Cake claims to have had a hard time sleeping. Why?
54. Why did Janie almost fall asleep while hanging on a newel post?
55. Why did Tea Cake make it a point to visit Janie very early in the morning when their relationship was just developing?
56. What did Janie and Tea Cake do at Winter Park?
57. What rumors or accusations did the men of Eatonville make against Tea Cake when they first noticed he was spending time with Janie?
58. Janie says "*it* would be a complete flommuck". What does she mean by this?
59. Who was Annie Tyler and what happened to her? Why did Phoeby remind Janie about her?
60. Why did Tea Cake go to Jacksonville?
61. What reason does Tea Cake give Janie for stealing her \$200? What did he spend the money on?
62. What is a "boogerboo" and what did Tea Cake do to him/it?
63. What type of gambling was Tea Cake particularly fond of?
64. How did Tea Cake wind up being cut by a man with a switch blade?
65. During what time of year did Janie and Tea Cake travel down to the muck?
66. What did they plan to do on the muck?
67. Why did Tea Cake try to get to the muck "early"?

68. What special skills or hobbies did Tea Cake teach Janie for the first time in her life?
69. Why did Tea Cake encourage Janie to work with him in the fields?
70. Who was Nunkie and why was she chunky?
71. What kind of “dances” did Janie and Tea Cake start to have or host in back of her house?
72. Why did Mrs. Turner speak so disparagingly about Booker T. Washington?
73. Why was Mrs. Turner especially attracted to Janie?
74. According to the narrator, why did Mrs. Turner patiently endure mistreatment or cruelty from Janie?
75. Why did Tea Cake feel it was necessary to whip and slap Janie?
76. How did Tea Cake’s friends react when they learned Tea Cake had beaten Janie?
77. What circumstances led to the brawl at Mrs. Turner’s?
78. How did Tea Cake react when the brawl broke out?
79. What was Mrs. Turner’s opinion of Tea Cake? Of Booker T. Washington?
80. Why did Mrs. Turner feel the way she did about Tea Cake?
81. Who or what was Big John de Conquer?
82. Explain the circumstances which led the narrator to say “their eyes were watching God.” Whose eyes are intended?
83. How did Tea Cake acquire hydrophobia?
84. Why was Tea Cake accosted by a white man with a rifle? What did this man force him to do?
85. Explain how Tea Cake died.
86. Describe how the Black community behaved during Janie’s trial.
87. Describe how the white community behaved during Janie’s trial.
88. What kind of funeral was held for Tea Cake?
89. How did Janie respond to the cruelty from Sop de Bottom and Tea Cake’s other friends?
90. At the end of the novel, Janie tells Phoeby that there are two things that everybody has to learn for themselves. What are those two things?
91. At the end of the novel, what is Janie’s attitude toward(s) the town gossips of Eatonville?