“‘New Thoughts Had tuh be Thought and New Words Said’”: Reconsidering Identity and the Human Experience in Literary Representations of African American Marriages in Early to Mid-Twentieth Century Literature

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The concepts of identity and the human experience have long been grappled with in the fields of English, History, and Sociology. These two concepts on their own may generate vague notions of their meanings and relations to one another, but within the context of African American marriage they can be made more tangible. The reconsideration of identity and the human experience within literary representations of African American marriages in early to mid-twentieth century literature is significant because more is shared with us concerning these concepts than what readily meets the eye. As a smaller portion of a larger project that incorporates Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Dorothy West’s *The Wedding*, this paper will focus on Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which will take us on a journey with the protagonist, Janie Crawford, throughout her marriages.From a larger perspective, by taking a journey with the dynamic female African American characters in Hurston’s, Walker’s, and West’s novels, we are able to witness and hear these author’s concerns deflecting the predominant social ideals of the time and interrogating the concepts of identity and the human experience within the context of marriage. Hurston, West, and Walker challenge predominant social ideals concerning gender roles, economic factors, educational circumstances, and class that limit the development and celebration of African American women’s identities within their marriages. It is through the lives of these dynamic female characters’ that we are able to see themselves thinking new thoughts so that new words could be said in terms of their individual fulfillment and marital happiness (Hurston 109).

The primary goal of this paper is to examine how predominant social ideals of economics, education, gender roles, and class are integrated within and influence literary representations of African American marriages within Hurston’s novel. After accomplishing the first goal, as a secondary goal this paper will explain why it is important to reconsider identity and the human experience within the context of the protagonist’s, Janie’s, marriages. Establishing a bridge between the academic fields of English, History, and Sociology, literary analysis will be employed to explain certain aspects of the literary works. Scholarly resources from historical and sociological backgrounds will serve to enhance the understanding and interpretation of ideals, motives, behaviors, roles, identity, and the human experience. This project utilizes an interdisciplinary approach as it analyzes Hurston’s novel through a sociological and historical lens while discussing literary representations of African American marriages.

It is important to gain better insight on the sight and times that this paper will focus on, and that is from the early to mid-twentieth century. If you were born in the latter years of the 20th Century, you might think about the time during which your great or great-great grandmother was born. We will begin in the South right before the turn of the 20th Century; bring your travelling shoes, pen, and paper.

Take just one moment and imagine that the year is 1898. For some this might be a task, but in terms of history this is post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction which implies that environments differed across the nation from the poverty-stricken areas of the South to the wealthier industrial areas of the North (*The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*; Johnson and Campbell62). A large number of immigrants are settling in the country for greater economic opportunities in the North, and a number of African Americans are also beginning to move again (Johnson and Campbell 63-9). Now, let us establish location.

To provide you with a more accurate picture of your current location, you are at a small house in West Florida. A portrait of the South during this time as described by Daniel Johnson and Rex Campbell in their book on African American migratory patterns and purposes entitled *Black Migration in America* would likely show the following as a common portrait of how African Americans likely lived within this region at this time: “Blacks lived in shacks or ‘wretched huts,’ and ‘everywhere the people showed their dress and manner of living that they [were] poor’” (Johnson and Campbell 62). This is just a general description of living conditions for African Americans in the South around 1898, and since we are at a small residence in West Florida I would like to introduce you to Janie Crawford, a sixteen year old girl at this time, who lives with her grandmother, Nanny, in Hurston’s novel. It is in this novel that we will begin our journey.

At the opening of Walker’s novel, we are unconventionally introduced to Janie as she returns from burying a significant loved one: “She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open” (Hurston 1). The approximate year during this time that she buries her loved one is 1918, and Janie is a middle-aged woman who is almost forty years old. Her story containing her life and marriages is revealed to us as she fills in the gaps for her friend of twenty years, Pheoby (Hurston 7).

As a girl at the age of sixteen, Janie lived with Nanny in West Florida, as mentioned earlier, and the pivot of her single life came around the time that she was growing up and “seeking confirmation of the voice and vision” for her life (Hurston 11). Janie had been observing how “a blossoming pear tree” and the process of pollination in which “the thousand sister-calyxes” bent to meet “a dust-bearing bee” (Hurston 10-11). Janie saw this mutual acceptance as “a marriage” and found herself wishing to be like “a pear tree [or]…*any* tree in bloom” (Hurston 11). The image of the pear tree blossoms leaning towards the bee is symbolic, as we will see later, of a mutual marriage and the type of love that Janie hopes to have within a marriage. So in the midst of Janie’s hopes, she begins searching for someone and spots Johnny Taylor whom Nanny finally catches her kissing. This event was not going to downplay Nanny’s intentions for Janie of having a better future than she or her mother, Leafy, and Nanny explains, “Ah wants to see you married right away…Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain’t yo’ idea, Ah see” (Hurston 12-3). Janie, still immature by the way that she immediately reacts, rejects Nanny’s desires for her to marry, but especially so when she is told that she is to marry Logan Killicks who appears to be a man more than twice her age.

Given Nanny’s initial intentions for Janie to attend school, despite Janie’s desires of finding love through marriage, we can begin to interpret some of Nanny’s ideals concerning life and success for a respectable woman, and especially concerning education. Nanny wanted Janie to complete her education, but based on Nanny’s prospects for Janie at such a year as 1898 this is very significant given that neither Nanny nor Janie have solid financial stability on their own due to the fact that they live in the Washburns’ yard and that some of their financial support is derived from the family. Nanny’s desire for Janie to obtain an education is a little more progressive in the sense of the era, given that a majority of African American women, especially rural African American women, were likely to have been working for Caucasian Americans as domestics or on farms, not sitting in a schoolhouse to gain an education—even for Janie’s mother it was rather progressive. But Janie’s greater interest in the young man, Johnny Taylor, flipped Nanny’s hopes and she resolves for the old ascension of status and protection through marriage—a reflection of Victorian-era ideals indeed.

Nanny goes on to tell us that she was born during the era of slavery in the United States and bore Janie’s mother illegitimately to her master. Leafy, who attended school, later was raped by her schoolteacher and Janie was born. Nanny wants Janie to “marry off decent like” and not “hug and kiss…with first one man and then another” (Hurston 13). She also tells Janie the reason why she wants her to marry Logan Killicks, a man presumably twice her age, as she says, “‘Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (Hurston 14). To decipher her meaning, she wants Janie to have the chance to become a *wife,* and not just any old *wife* with a man to “wipe his foots on”, but a *wife* with economic stability in terms of finances and a hard-working and protective husband (Hurston 12). Logan owns his own farm and sixty acres of land, and Janie could inherit the farm and his property through marriage (Hurston 20). Therefore, what Nanny views as “[marrying] off decent like” is for Janie to (1) marry a man who is economically stable so she could be also, and (2) marry a man who is going to care about and protect her. These views factor into Nanny’s economic and gender role ideals, and we will see these ideals reinforced as we go on.

So in the short time to follow, Janie marries Logan and moves to his farm, but the constant question in her mind is about love: “[Does] marriage compel love…?” (Hurston 20). After remembering Nanny’s reassurance, Janie comes to believe that it does eventually; “Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant” (Hurston 20). But in the case of her marriage to Logan, Janie finds that she is not attracted to Logan in terms of his appearance and starts to wonder about love. When she speaks to Nanny about it, Nanny tells her:

You come heah wid yo’ mouf full uh foolishness on uh busy day. Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on…big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killicks, and you come worryin’ me ‘bout love…Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road…Dat’s de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat’s just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night (Hurston 22).

Nanny tells Janie that she is whining and to get over it. Janie is married with an inheritance of land and a nice house, which is good in terms of economic stability, and she is worried about finding love. Funny enough, Nanny tells her that she probably “wants some dressed up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe everytime he cross de street tuh see whether he got enough leather dere tuh make it across” (22) and that type of guy is exactly the next one that will come along and catch Janie’s interest to Logan’s dismay. So in terms of Janie’s marriage to Logan, she was economically stable, rejected the concerns of a formal education, and rejected her role as helpmate in terms of gender roles as we will soon see when an issue arises that involves her helping him with an outdoor chore.

In the midst of this information we have gathered so far, Janie comes to realize that “marriage did not make love. [Her] first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (Hurston 24). In the midst of Janie’s misconstrued idea about marriage equating love in terms of mutual attraction, Janie matured and realized that marriage did not make this ideal a reality. Lauer and Lauer in their book *Marriage & Family: The Quest for Intimacy Eighth Edition* provide several types of love according the ancient Greek language. They assert that “the term *love* is illustrated by four ancient Greek words”, and they are “storge”, “philia”, “eros”, and “agape” (Lauer and Lauer 130-1). Storge is a type of love that is “the least discriminating” and can be found shared between parents and children, while philia is a type of love that “exists between friends” (Lauer and Lauer 131). Eros is a type of that involves physical attraction, and agape is a type of love that “is independent of one’s feelings for another” or is shown when “we will to act beneficially toward another” (Lauer and Lauer 131). The sum-type of love that Janie appears to seek is one that intermingles all four which is described as “‘consummate love’” according to Robert J. Sternberg. Sternberg describes that consummate love is compilation of “intimacy”, “passion”, and “decision/commitment” (Lauer and Lauer 141). Providing his triangular theory of love, Sternberg acknowledges that the three aforementioned aspects of consummate love can exist separately or altogether (Lauer and Lauer 141).We can assume that with Janie’s marriage to Logan she has not learned of nor found a type of like this yet, and this is further evidenced within the following incident involving them both as we learn about her ideals concerning gender roles.

One particular incident between Janie and Logan that allows us to consider her ideals concerning gender roles is when she is summoned to help Logan outside to move a pile of dung before the temperature rises.

Logan beckons, “Janie!...Come help me move dis manure pile befo’ de sun gits hot. You don’t take a bit of interest in dis place. ‘Tain’t no use in foolin’ round in dat kitchen all day long” (Hurston 29-30).

In response, Janie says, “You don’t need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo’ place and Ah’m in mine” (Hurston 30).

This did not set well with Logan so he lays the law down to her: “You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick” (Hurston 30).

Janie, interpreting his anger, tells him, “Youse mad ‘cause Ah don’t fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain’t done me no favor by marryin’ me. And if dat’s what you call yo’self doin’, Ah don’t thank yuh for it. Youse mad ‘cause I’m tellin’ yuh whut you already knowed” (Hurston 30). And at this moment, there appears to be a screen because the silence is very thick.

Logan “[makes] two or three clumsy steps towards the house, then [stops] abruptly,” and says, “Ah just as good as take you out de white folks’ kitchen and set you down…and you take and low-rate me!...Ah’m too honest and hard-workin’ for anybody in yo’ family, dat’s de reason you don’t want me!...Ah guess some low-lifed nigger is grinnin’ in yo’ face and lyin’ tuh yuh” (Hurston 30).

And sure enough, there was another man “grinnin’” in Janie’s face, but before hearing the rest of her story, let us pick apart what we know thus far (Hurston 30). Janie did not want to help her husband with outdoor duties; she would have rather stayed in the house and cooked. Her words even secure her idea of gender roles in terms of place and where she belonged versus him. This is likely to have something to do with the words she had with a man that she had met, Joseph Starks (we will learn more about their meeting later). Janie appears to agree that a woman’s place is in the household caring for domestic duties and not assisting with outdoor responsibilities with her husband *if* it is against her will. The key aspect of choice is at work in Janie’s ideals concerning gender roles as we will learn more about later. Janie stands her ground against Logan and brings him to tears. He realizes that working for the woman he desires would not be enough to keep her. Janie wanted more than a hard-working husband and did not care about his wealth. She had other thoughts in mind, and those thoughts aligned with the thoughts that Joe Starks was passing off to her, which involved a woman being placed on a pedestal in the household and not moving a manure pile on the farm.

As we close this chapter of Janie’s life with her marriage to Logan, it is important to discuss his gender roles ideals within the context of history. Logan’s ideals align with those of nineteenth century southern yeomen farmers. According to Sylvia D. Hoffert in *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles*, she writes that “Yeomen farmers…tied their identity as men to ownership of land and the sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy that land ownership gave them” (Hoffert 170). In addition to this sense of identity aligned with property ownership, yeomen farmers’ “ideal farm wife was at her most womanly…when she was a sensible, industrious, and practical housekeeper, caring for her husband, even if that meant helping him with the field work” (Hoffert 211-12). These characteristics can be seen in Logan throughout his marriage to Janie as he truly cared for the maintenance of his land and crops. Logan also valued Janie’s help with his responsibilities despite the fact that she did not share his same passions and goals. These gender role ideals, though present during the nineteenth century, manifested themselves in Logan and Janie’s twentieth century marriage while contributing to its dissolution given that neither Logan nor Janie shared the same goals or interests.

Before we advance to the next chapter of Janie’s life, we learn that she abandons Logan without formal divorce. The following explains her new feelings as she anticipates greater horizons beyond her marriage to Logan:

A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her…She untied [her apron] and flung it on a low bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet. After that she came to where Joe Starks was waiting for her with a hired rig. He was very solemn and helped her to the seat beside him. With him on it, it sat like some high, ruling chair. From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime. A bee for her bloom. Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them (Hurston 31).

Janie abandons Logan Killicks for Joe Starks. She would be treated like the woman she thought herself to be, to be admired and given freedom to develop her own identity. Her old thoughts of love and marriage could return and she would finally have “a bee for her bloom” and that consummate love with someone who would help to encourage the growth and development of her identity as well as enhance her life experiences (Hurston 31). This would be a true marriage for Janie. This closes our discussion of Janie and Logan’s marriage, but it leads us to the opening of a new chapter in Janie’s life. Hold on to your hat, because the ride will get bumpy.