

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1901?-1960)
Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)



I. General Introduction:

A. one of the most often read Afro-American novels

1. Eyes: birth of modern black women's writing

B. controversies surrounding her life = the fluctuating status of her work within the Afro-American canon

1. women who **lived her life outside of the boundaries of accepted narratives for blacks and women**

C. **Wallace Thurman's Infants of Spring**: "Sweetie May was a short story writer, more noted for her ribald wit and personal effervescence than for any actual literary work. She was a great favorite among those whites who went in for Negro prodigies. Mainly because she lived up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be. . . . Given a paleface audience, Sweetie May would launch forth into a saga of the little-colored Mississippi town where she claimed to have been born. Her repertoire of tales was earthy, vulgar and funny. Her darkies always smiled through their tears, sang spirituals on the slightest provocation and performed buck dances. . . . Sweetie May was a master of southern dialect, and an able raconteur. . . . But Sweetie May knew her white folks."

D. **Langston Hughes in The Big Sea**: "Of this 'niggerati,' Zora Neale Hurston was certainly the most amusing. Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books -- because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in just such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragi-comic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as the daughter of a traveling minister of God. . . . To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie' in the nice meaning they give the term -- that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous and highly colored Negro."

E. different from the mainstream of blacks in **gender, class, and culture**

F. Alice Walker: "In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora belongs in the tradition of black

women singers, rather than among 'the literati,' at least to me. There were the extreme heights and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from 'common' people. It would have been nice if the three of them had one another to turn to, in times of need. I close my eyes and imagine them: Bessie would be in charge of all the money; Zora would keep Billie's masochistic tendencies in check and prevent her from singing embarrassing anything-for-a-man songs, thereby preventing Billie's heroine addiction. In return, Billie felt could be, along with Bessie, the family that Zora felt she never had." (Walker, 1983: 91-92)

G. tendency to make her a **blues heroine** or a **minstrel figure** in the Harlem Renaissance

1. throughout her life was a sort of female trickster figure

II. Brief Biography

A. defies the collective biography of the Harlem Renaissance writers¹

B. Born in 1901 in Eatonville, Florida²

1. all black town (ideology of)

2. grew up inside, consciousness shaped by the oral tradition

C. son of Reverend John Hurston

1. three times mayor of Eatonville, and like Moses was codifier of his laws

2. conservative

D. mother encouraged her

1. mother's death at age nine

E. step-mother (wicked)

¹The notion of collective biography is best known in Malcolm Cowley's _____.

²"Depending on the document, and whether she was trying to impress someone with her youth or her age, she claimed to be born in 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, or 1903. On family member says the year might be 1891." (Hemenway, 13)

F. ran away from home at eighteen (with a troupe of entertainers)

1. financially on her own for the rest of her life

G. Morgan and Howard University

1. Opportunity literary contest
2. literary secretary to Fannie Hurst (Imitation of Life, 1933)

H. scholarship from Barnard

1. studied with Franz Boaz at Columbia

I. twice married (doctor, younger man)

III. Literary Career

A. 4 novels³

B. 2 anthropological/folklore studies⁴

C. one autobiography

IV. Their Eyes Were Watching God: Introduction

A. **three ways to read** the novel

1. women's compliment to the poetry and prose of the Harlem Renaissance
 - a. classic narrative of immersion
 - (1) narrative of ascent (symbolic)
 - (a) rendered differently
 - (2) self-discovery through descent
 - (3) the "muck"

³Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Moses Man of the Mountain (1939), and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948).

⁴Mules and Men (1935), Tell My Horse (1938).

2. classic representation of self through the vernacular voice in the writing⁵
 - a. problem of narration
 - b. how do you tell a story of coming into self in the third person
 - c. careful examination of the narrator
 - (1) voice has strong vernacular characteristics
 - d. Henry Louis Gates: "speakerly text" -- ". . . a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition designed to 'emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns actual speech and product the 'illusion of oral narration'" (Gates, 1988: 181).
 - (1) more easily done in poetry than in extended prose pieces
3. classic African-American feminist text
 - a. from dependence to independence
 - b. from silence to voice
 - c. from alienate desire to self-possessed desire

V. Their Eyes Were Watching God: Introduction

- A. Intro: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do thing accordingly." (UI, 9)

⁵"The second mode of Signifyin(g) that I have chosen to represent in this text is exemplified in the peculiar play of 'voices' at work in the use of 'free indirect discourse' in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Above all else, Hurston's narrative strategy seems to concern itself with the possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing. . . . Free indirect discourse is represented in this canonical text as if it were a dynamic character, with shifts in its level of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness.. The direct discourse of the novel's black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator come together to form a third term, a truly double-voiced narrative mode. That element of narration that the Russian Formalists called *skaz* -- when a text seems to be aspiring to the status of oral narration -- is most clearly the closest analogue of Hurston's rhetorical strategy" (Gates, 1988: xxv-xxvi).

1. nature of the two types of narratives

- a. external reference

- (1) Henry Louis Gates: reference is to **Douglass's dream of freedom**⁶

- b. narrative of internal construction

2. establishes some of the basic symbolic structure for the novel

- a. horizon

- b. dream

- B. "outcast"

- C. struggle between the reconciliation between the public and private sphere (sexuality) of experience

- D. ". . . she projects a new and different community, first for black women, second for women, and finally, for both women and men." (Callahan, 119)

- VI. Janie comes of age

- A. From the back porch Janie tells her story to Phoebe

- B. The tree symbolism

1. Great tree

- a. Summarizes Janie's life

- b. Able to contain the totality of her life

- (1) vis DuBois and Toomer's double consciousness

Great Tree

Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches. (21)

⁶"A Woman, by contrast, represents desire metaphorically, rather than metonymically, by controlling the process of memory, an active subjective process figured in the pun on (re)membering, as in the process of narration which Janie will share with her friend, Phoebe, and which we shall 'overhear.'" (Gates, 1988: 172).

C. Begins with the Pear Tree

1. Markes Janie's coming of age
 - a. Coming into consciousness
2. Like Douglass gaining literacy
 - a. Uses similar terms
3. The underlying form of consciousness in sexual
 - a. Describes something like an orgasm or a menstrual period
4. Provides and ideal she will use to measure her experiences

D. Grandmother recognizes immediately "youse got yo' womanhood on yoh" (26)

1. Fears she will sucumbe to desire and Johnny Taylor

Grandmother's Tree

Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundations of ancient power that no longer mattered.

VII. Grandmother as "black female ancestral text" (Callahan, 128)

A. Described as a tree

It was a spring afternoon in West florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had noting to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. I connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness. (22-24)

B. Embodied the female legacy of slavery

1. rape by white master

- a. recalls the web of sexuality and violence that shaped post-Reconstruction Afro-American/American gender consciousness
- b. at the center of racial and sexual hierarchy in Southern society

2. daughter's rape by black schoolteacher (2: 36-37)

- a. unity of maleness
- b. maleness = power + caprice

C. Sees women as the bottom of the ladder and the ultimate victim

1. Wants to protect Janie through a marriage to Logan Killiks

Ah Didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood -sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither . It sho wasn't mah will for thing to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank god, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon a abuo colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me.

Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He had it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (29)

2. Has a fundamental vision

- a. Colored women sitting on high
 - (1) not that it is plural
- b. Classically a narrative of ascent
- c. Seen in conventional gender terms
 - (1) thus the marriage to Logan Killiks

VIII. Logan Killicks ("and his often-mentioned sisty acres" (3, 38)

A. Janie: "First Dream was Dead so she became a woman" (3,44)

Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah don lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine. (171)

IX. Jody Starks (Chapters - 8)

A. Jo starks speaks of the horizon (4-5)

B. Grandmothers legacy (12, 171, 172)

C. Jodie's voice

1. Refused to let Janie Speak (5: 59-70)
2. Janie sleeps with power (5, 74)
3. Joe business and whiteness (5, 75-77)
4. Joe Starks (6: 111-112)
5. The emasculation (7: 121-123)

X. Tea Cake Vergible Woods (Chapters 9 - 20)

1. In length almost half the book

B. Janie is left a rich widow

1. Object of courtship
2. memorial figure in this text = grandmother in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

C. Enter Tea Cake

1. is of a part with Hughes's, Cullen's, and McKay's blues musicians and waiters

She knew in her head that she was absolute owner, but it always seemed to her that she was still clerking for Joe and that soon he would come in and find something wrong that she had done. She almost apologized to the tenants the first time she collected the rents. (141)

- a. A mirror of Janie's desire:
"Tea Cake wasn't strange. Seemed as if she had know him all her life. Look how he had been able to talk with him right off! (151)

- b. "He looked like the love thoughts of women" (11: 161)
- 2. Series of simple gestures give Janie life
 - a. Teaches her to play checkers
 - b. Squeezed her lemons for lemonade
 - c. Combed her hair
 - d. Took her fishing
- D. Janie comes into her own
 - 1. Recognizes the legitimacy of her own desire.
 - a. Rejects the view of other in Eatonville
 - 2. Differentiates herself from her grandmother and begins to create her own narrative (pg. 172)
 - 3. Integration into community
 - a. Falling away from the bourgeois conventions
 - b. Validation of the vernacular narrative voice
 - 4. Follows Teacake to Jacksonville
 - a. Marries
- E. Annie Tyler's Story (with Who Flung)
 - 1. The possibility of Janie's gamble
 - 2. Returns to Maitland broken
 - a. Reminiscent of Janie's entry into Maitland

Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea Cake and Janie gone to a dance. Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie's yard and seeding the garden for her. Chopping down that tree she never did like b the dining room window. All those signs of possession. Tea Cake in a borrowed car teaching Janie to drive. Tea Cake and Janie playing checkers; playing coon-can; playing Florida flip on the store porch all afternoon as if nobody else was there. Day after day and week after week. (166-167)

XI. Janie's Descent

- A. Not romanticized
- B. Immersion into experience
 - 1. Drinking
 - 2. Gambling
 - 3. Bar fights
- C. Defined by the economic possibilities of Tea Cake
- D. Descend into the “muck” – the Florida everglades
 - 1. Picks beans
 - 2. Becomes a part of a new community (200)
- E. The turn
 - 1. Descent into violence
 - a. Tea Cake and Janie Fight
 - b. Tea Cake hits Janie (218)
- F. The storm
 - 1. Teacake gets rabies
 - 2. Janie shoots Tea Cake
- XII. Court room and aftermath: “It was not death she feared but misunderstanding” (279)
 - 1. white men do not understand
 - a. Served the role of judgement
 - b. Submission to the law
 - 2. white women seek and feel the truth of her story
 - a. Do not know the context
 - 3. Janie seeks reintegration
 - 4. in the black community

From now on, you gointuh eat whutever
may money can buy yuh and wear de
same. When Ah ain't got nothin' you don't
git notin'. (191)

- a. Misunderstood brutalized -> seek reintegration

XIII. Memorial spaces

A. Teacake

B. The grandmother

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sight out of every corner in the room; out of each chari and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sight felew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memeory mad pictures of love and light against the wall. Her was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see (286)

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON:
A Working Bibliography**

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*** Awkward reviews the criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from the time of its first publication to the present. Noting that the book was not favorably reviewed at the time of its publication, he explains the reasons for its increasing popularity. Drawing on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's notion of "contingencies of value," Awkward suggest that the critical framework of values that has shaped the Afro-Americanist's evaluation of literature has shifted. After the 1970's the increasing value placed on the vernacular tradition and the emergence of feminist criticism has combined to bring *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into the mainstream of contemporary critical values.

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**** Carby places Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* within the larger context of the discourse of the Harlem Renaissance and Depression fiction. She returns to the issues raised by Richard Wright in his review of her novel. In Carby's analysis Hurston did not face the major historical contradiction of the emergence of an urban working class. Unlike Hughes, Hurston returned to the terrain of her childhood to create a rural and romanticized version of the folk. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, Hurston emphasized the formation of an individualized and historicized voice that went beyond the collective community voice. Finally, Carby suggests that at least part of the reasons for the popularity of Hurston's work is that it provides the same reassurance to its contemporary readers that it did readers in the 1930's by returning to a rural paradigm of blackness.

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