
Feminist Tone Of Their Eyes Were Watching God

"Their Eyes Were Watching God" is a novel which belongs to the genre of Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel), American Southern spiritual journey. It was written by Zora Neale Hurston in September 1937. "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. However, 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. So, to what extent has this novel addressed the feminist theory and gender issues in the American society?

Upon its initial publication in 1937, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, received a majority of negative criticism. Regarded as 'boldly feminist,' it wasn't until after the civil rights movement and an increase in the feminist movement that Hurston's work came to be appreciated and eventually revered. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* embodies many feminist concerns that have afflicted women for generations and illuminates the notion that the idea of social roles as dictated by one sex is a foolish concept. Through the main character, Janie, and her ability to liberate herself from domineering relationships, Hurston is able to illustrate the limitations placed upon women through gender stereotypes and the way in which feminism helps women to break free of those culturally imposed limitations.

One of the most important characters for demonstrating the depth of gender inequality was Nanny, Janie's paternal grandmother and caretaker. Nanny was born a slave during which time she birthed a child to her master, Janie's mother. Janie's paternal mother's life was later ruined by an act of rape, which bore Janie, leaving Janie to be raised by Nanny. Initially it appears that Nanny has the best intentions to provide Janie with a good life.

'Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from

a higher bush and a sweeter berry'

(p. 18).

She tells Janie, 'Ah been waitin' a long time,

Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much

if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah

dreamed' (p. 18).

However, as the story progresses it becomes apparent that Nanny's experiences earlier in life provide the true motivation for the way she treats Janie. Though Nanny encourages Janie to aspire to a better life, she does so with a deep distrust for others and life in general. In her own past, Nanny was convinced that she had little worth which was inherently connected to her gender and skin colour (Miller 82). As a result of Nanny's early life as a slave and the poor

treatment she received from others, stemmed a deep abhorrence for men, blackness, and femininity (Johnson 409). Nanny's animosity is most apparent in the way she speaks to Janie. During what is viewed as Janie's 'sexual awakening,' Nanny generates a negative vision of what she interprets as the reality of the situation (Thompson 756). The kiss Janie shares with Johnny Taylor is understood by Nanny to be an act of defilement. Nanny then denies Janie the natural act of coming into womanhood and discovering her sexuality by telling her:

'Ah don't want no trashy nigger ... usin' your body to wipe his foots on.' As the Black woman is economically a mule, she is sexually a 'spit cup' for both white and Black males (p. 15).

Nanny's thoughts demonstrate that the belief of women having less worth than their male counterparts had ingrained itself into the depth of society so that the women themselves believed it as well (Bealer 316). Under the guise of protecting Janie, Nanny arranges for her to marry Logan Killicks, an older local man.

At first the reader is sympathetic toward Nanny because of her personal history and understands her treatment of Janie to be acts of love and protection. As Janie grows and comes into control of her own life, she herself, and thusly the reader, are forced to reassess Nanny's actions. After the death of Joe Starks, Janie's reflection of her and Nanny's relationship reveals that Nanny's ideas of what Janie should desire in life is not oriented toward self-fulfilment as a woman, and are even destructive to an extent (Ferguson 189). Janie comes to resent and even hate Nanny for her views of blackness and femininity. Janie's eventual hatred of Nanny at the end of the story symbolizes her journey to personal control of her own womanhood. As Janie leaves behind Nanny's notions of womanhood, which is reflective of society as a whole, she discovers that her femininity bears no limitation upon her capabilities and does not dictate how her life should or shouldn't be lived.

When Nanny arranges Janie's first marriage, young Janie complies, blinded by her own inexperience to see past Nanny and into her true motives. Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks is not based on love and devotion but rather seems to be a work arrangement. Logan uses Janie, in a sense, to 'increase his profits' (Ferguson 187). This is evident when Logan travels to Lake City to buy a second mule for the purpose of Janie helping to plough the potato field because potatoes are 'bringin' big prices' (Their Eyes 27). It is then that Janie decides she must break free from her life with Logan Killicks, a strongly feminist decision, as it was uncommon for a woman to take such a responsibility over her own life (Krasner 115). In doing so, Janie speaks her mind to Logan when he tries to reprimand her refusal to work the fields and the home by stating that he:

'...ain't done [her] no favour by marryin' [her]' (Their Eyes 31).

Janie's self-determination fuses with themes of feminism as she breaks away from the confines of her first marriage and runs off with Joe Starks, her soon to be second husband. In marrying Joe Starks, Janie hopes to become a real wife rather than the worker Logan treated her as. Janie believes Joe when he tells her,

'Janie, if you think Ah aims to tole you off and make a dog outa you, youse wrong. Ah wants to make a wife outa you' (Their Eyes 29).

By refusing to remain with Logan and be treated like a live-in employee, Janie demonstrates an

uncommon fearlessness. As she begins to take responsibility for her future Janie becomes a woman. Her courage to leave an unhappy life with her current husband was rare of women in the 1930's and therefore a shamelessly feminist action (Thompson 740). While most women of the time wouldn't think to voice themselves to their husbands, Janie is daring enough to stand up to her husband, regardless of his violent threats, and leave him when she sees a future with him as bleak.

Though Janie's marriage to Joe is partly an escape to her previous life with Logan Killicks, she realizes early on that her marriage to Joe has been a tradeoff for a new form of confinement and domination (McGowan 112). Joe forbids Janie from socializing in the town and limits her to working in the store he has built. Joe's dictation of how Janie is to live her life prevents her from being a member of the town's social life, relegating her to being seen only as 'Joe's wife' (Miller 83). Not only was Joe domineering over Janie, but he was verbally and physically abusive as well. In a bout of physical abuse, Joe slapped Janie for preparing a dinner that did not turn out well.

'So when the bread didn't rise, and the fish wasn't quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears...' (Their Eyes 72).

As the marriage progresses the abuse (physical and verbal) Joe imposes upon Janie continues. Eventually, however, Janie yet again finds the courage to stand up for herself as she had done before. One day in the presence of customers at their store Joe begins to ridicule Janie about her attractiveness and sexual desirability, or lack thereof. Again doing as most women of the time wouldn't dare to do, Janie stands up for herself and voices a defence.

'Naw Ah ain't no young gal...But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me...Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big bellies around here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph...When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life' (Their Eyes 122-23).

In turn, Joe slaps Janie as physical violence has continuously been his retort when he feels that Janie speaks out of her 'place.'

Once Janie finally stands up to Joe, he feels robbed of his authority as a man and no longer verbally abuses her. He begins to grow sicker and sicker until he is eventually bed ridden. Even upon his death bed Janie remains honest about Joe's imperious treatment of her throughout their relationship. By resisting Joe's verbal domination of her, Janie challenges the gender politics that would otherwise leave her voiceless and powerless (Thompson 740). Yet again Janie uses her voice, against the custom of the female gender role, to regain control of her life and her desires. At first Janie accepts her marriage to Joe and withdraws into herself, but as time progresses so does Janie's desire for freedom. Janie is unable to deny her inherently feminist ways and eventually fights against Joe's repressiveness.

After Joe Stark dies Janie meets Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. Much like Joe, Tea Cake appears to be a new source of liberation for Janie, but for a change, Tea Cake treats her as an equal. On the first day Tea Cake meets Janie he teaches her how to play checkers, a game Joe Starks had forbidden her from playing. When Tea Cake began teaching Janie the rules,

'she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural

for her to play' (Their Eyes 95-6).

Janie is finally able to find what she has desired for her whole life, a sense of equality.

As a conclusion, there are various theories as to the message Zora Neale Hurston intended to be taken from her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is uncontested that the work as a whole contains strong ideologies of feminism and exemplifies the rigours of female self-discovery (Krasner 118). Using the novel's main heroine, Janie, Hurston is able to progress and illustrate various issues regarding the sociocultural female identity. As Janie overcomes four domineering relationships, she releases her independent spirit and discovers her abilities as a strong and passionate woman. Over time Janie is able to refute the pressures of society imposed upon her because of her womanhood which allows her to reach a new level of equality with men. Although she ended up alone at the end of the story, through her trials, Janie comes to find and believe in her own strengths. Having grown to true independence, Janie is not compelled any longer to find need in being with a man. She proves that her feminist prowess helped her to fight for what she believed and to take control of her own life, living it for herself and no one else.