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## Their Eyes Were Watching God: The Impact Of Janie's Cultural Surroundings

Pauline Hopkins, a prominent African-American journalist and novelist once said "after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency" (Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, the protagonist--Janie Crawford--is deeply impacted and influenced by her cultural surroundings. The existence of racial segregation and gender discrimination have significant effect on Janie's character.

In a conversation between Janie and Nanny, Nanny explains to Janie that "de white man is de 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" (Hurston 14). This quote shows that there is a social hierarchy that is based on racial discrimination. Not only is the hierarchy based on discrimination, but Nanny goes on to say in the very next line, "He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston 14). It is now also known that the social hierarchy is ordered according to gender as well as race. Being a black female, Janie faced discrimination in ways that other members of society did not have to.

One of Janie's primary aspirations in life is to live independently. She wears overalls and works in the field unlike the common house-wife during that time. This does not however mean that Janie is not looking for marriage. Janie is a helpless romantic. Unlike her grandma, though, she desires to find true love, and not simply marry some "white master." Though some literary critics view this book as a feminist writing and Janie does achieve some independence, she was raised on the idea that she must have a man (husband) to define her and complete her. Nearly all of Janie's experiences are brought by a male figure who is a subject in her search for love.

Janie was birthed by a poor black woman who was raped by a white school teacher. Her mother left her, leaving her with her grandmother, whose views about society have been shaped according to the one in which she has lived. Because of Janie's upbringing and her grandmother's influence on her, Janie can not help but to believe in the largely accepted cultural norms like the role of women which is simply being the wife to a man. As shown earlier, Janie's grandmother (Nanny) believes that the white men rule over the black men, and furthermore, black men rule over the black women, making black women the "mule" of the world. Janie was raised by a woman who was fully aware of the social hierarchy and raised her granddaughter accordingly. After Janie kissed a passerby over her Nanny's fence, she was told, "yeah, Janie, youse got yo' womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin' up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away." Janie is expected to marry immediately when she is of age, exploiting the gender norms of the culture.

Though Janie aspires to be independent and strong, she struggles to escape the common gender norms of her society. She wants to be different, but the societal views of those who raised and influenced her are so hard-wired into her person that she cannot avoid or dismiss the feelings of the necessity to marry as quickly as she can. Janie goes through three marriages

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with men. Two of these relationships were abusive and mentally and physically damaging to her. The third relationship, though better and much closer to the true love Janie was looking for, ends tragically. Because of this, Janie never fully develops into the independent and healthy woman she wants to be. She only sort of achieves the independence she was searching for after her third relationship, which by then she is scarred from her previous abusive circumstances. Hurston said it best herself, "she had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her."

Thanks to Janie's cultural surroundings, she found it nearly impossible to achieve her goals of independence and feeling of worth. Her life and character as well as her very essence were so substantially influenced by her social surroundings so that she could hardly achieve her personal goals. It is made evident by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that Hopkins' proposition has grounds to it. People really are influenced by their surroundings just as much as they might be by things like fate, destiny, or any supernatural force. If Janie's cultural surroundings would have been different, her life could may have been changed crucially--and most likely for the better.