

their eyes were watching god zora neale hurston

their eyes were watching god zora neale hurston stands as a monumental work in American literature, encapsulating the African American experience through the lens of a strong female protagonist. This novel, written by Zora Neale Hurston, explores themes of identity, love, independence, and self-realization. As a seminal piece of the Harlem Renaissance, it offers rich cultural and historical insights, while also providing a narrative style that blends folklore, dialect, and poetic prose. This article delves into the background of Hurston and her novel, examines the key themes and characters, and analyzes its literary significance and impact. Readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of why *their eyes were watching god* remains a vital work in both African American literature and the broader American literary canon.

- Background of Zora Neale Hurston and the Novel
- Plot Overview and Major Characters
- Themes and Symbolism in Their Eyes Were Watching God
- Literary Style and Narrative Techniques
- Cultural and Historical Significance
- Critical Reception and Legacy

Background of Zora Neale Hurston and the Novel

Zora Neale Hurston was an influential African American writer and anthropologist who played a pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance. Born in 1891 in Alabama and raised in Eatonville, Florida—one of the first all-Black towns incorporated in the United States—Hurston's upbringing deeply influenced her literary voice. Her work often celebrated Black culture and folklore, resisting the stereotypes prevalent in early 20th-century literature. Published in 1937, *their eyes were watching god* is Hurston's most acclaimed novel, representing her mature artistic vision. The book reflects her anthropological interests, weaving vernacular speech and oral traditions into a compelling narrative about a Black woman's search for identity and autonomy.

Plot Overview and Major Characters

The novel chronicles the life of Janie Crawford, a Black woman in the early 20th century South, as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery through three marriages and personal trials. Janie's story unfolds as a retrospective narrative, recounting her

experiences to her friend Pheoby Watson after returning to Eatonville.

Janie Crawford

Janie is the protagonist whose evolving sense of self and desire for independence drive the narrative. Her quest for love and fulfillment challenges societal expectations and gender roles prevalent during her time.

Key Supporting Characters

The novel features several important characters who shape Janie's life and development:

- **Logan Killicks:** Janie's first husband, representing traditional and oppressive marriage.
- **Joe Starks:** Janie's second husband, a charismatic and ambitious man who silences her voice.
- **Tea Cake:** Janie's third husband, who offers companionship and a more egalitarian relationship.

Themes and Symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The novel is rich with themes that explore human experience, identity, and social dynamics. Hurston's use of symbolism enhances the depth of these themes.

Self-Identity and Independence

A central theme is Janie's pursuit of self-identity beyond the confines of marriage and societal expectations. Her journey symbolizes the struggle for personal freedom and self-expression, particularly for Black women.

Love and Relationships

Hurston examines different forms of love through Janie's marriages, contrasting possessive, oppressive relationships with genuine companionship and mutual respect, ultimately highlighting the importance of authentic connections.

Nature and Spirituality

Natural imagery, such as the horizon, the pear tree, and the hurricane, symbolize Janie's aspirations, growth, and the uncontrollable forces of life and fate. These elements underscore the novel's exploration of humans' relationship with the universe.

Race and Gender

The novel addresses the intersectionality of race and gender, portraying the unique challenges faced by Black women in the early 20th century. Hurston's narrative critiques social norms and celebrates Black culture and resilience.

Literary Style and Narrative Techniques

Zora Neale Hurston's writing style in *their eyes were watching god* is notable for its lyrical prose, use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and integration of folklore and oral storytelling traditions.

Use of Dialect

Hurston employs vernacular speech to create authentic characters and capture the cultural essence of the Black communities depicted. This use of dialect enriches the narrative, providing a voice to marginalized perspectives.

Frame Narrative Structure

The novel is framed as Janie's recounting of her life story to her friend Pheoby, which adds a layer of intimacy and reflection. This structure allows for a nonlinear exploration of Janie's experiences.

Symbolism and Imagery

Hurston's vivid imagery and symbolic motifs contribute to the thematic complexity of the novel. The pear tree, horizon, and hurricane are recurring symbols that reflect Janie's internal and external struggles.

Cultural and Historical Significance

their eyes were watching god holds a significant place in both African American literature and American cultural history. It challenges prevailing narratives by centering the voice and perspective of a Black woman in a time when such representation was rare.

Contribution to the Harlem Renaissance

Though published towards the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's novel embodies the movement's celebration of Black cultural identity and artistic expression. It captures the complexities of Black life in the South, contributing to a broader understanding of African American heritage.

Gender and Feminist Perspectives

The novel is often studied for its feminist themes, highlighting Janie's resistance to patriarchal control and her assertion of autonomy. It remains a foundational text in discussions of Black feminism and womanist literature.

Representation of Black Southern Life

Hurston's ethnographic background informs her detailed portrayal of Black communities in the rural South, preserving cultural practices and social dynamics that were often overlooked in mainstream literature.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Initially, *their eyes were watching god* received mixed reviews and limited commercial success, partly due to its divergence from the politically charged literature favored by some contemporary critics. However, the novel experienced a resurgence in the 1970s, gaining recognition as a classic of American literature.

Early Reception

Contemporary critics sometimes criticized the novel for its focus on personal rather than political themes and for its use of dialect. Despite this, it was praised for its narrative artistry and unique voice.

Resurgence and Modern Appreciation

The feminist and Black literary movements of the late 20th century revived interest in Hurston's work, leading to its inclusion in academic curricula and broader public appreciation. Today, it is celebrated for its innovative storytelling and profound cultural insights.

Enduring Influence

The novel continues to inspire writers, scholars, and readers worldwide. Its exploration of selfhood, resilience, and cultural identity resonates across generations, securing its status

as a timeless literary masterpiece.

- Exploration of Black female identity
- Integration of folklore and vernacular
- Rich symbolism and thematic depth
- Historical and cultural authenticity
- Lasting impact on American literature

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' by Zora Neale Hurston?

The central theme of 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' is the journey of self-discovery and empowerment of the protagonist, Janie Crawford, as she seeks her own voice and identity through her relationships and life experiences.

How does Zora Neale Hurston use symbolism in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'?

Hurston uses symbolism extensively, such as the pear tree representing Janie's idealized views on nature and love, and the hurricane symbolizing the uncontrollable forces of life and fate that challenge Janie's resilience.

What role does gender play in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'?

Gender roles are critically examined in the novel, highlighting the limitations and expectations placed on women, especially Black women, and Janie's struggle to break free from patriarchal control to assert her independence.

How does the setting influence the narrative of 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'?

The setting in early 20th century rural Florida provides a cultural and social backdrop that shapes the characters' lives, reflecting the African American experience in the South and influencing Janie's interactions and growth.

What narrative style does Hurston employ in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'?

Hurston uses a frame narrative with a mix of standard English and African American Vernacular English, capturing authentic voices and oral storytelling traditions that enrich the novel's cultural depth.

Why is 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' considered a significant work in African American literature?

The novel is significant for its portrayal of Black womanhood, its use of folklore and vernacular language, and its challenge to racial and gender stereotypes, making it a landmark in both African American and feminist literature.

How does Janie's relationship with Tea Cake differ from her previous marriages?

Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is based on mutual respect, companionship, and genuine love, contrasting with her earlier marriages which were marked by control, dominance, and societal expectations.

Additional Resources

1. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

This classic novel tells the story of Janie Crawford, an African American woman in the early 20th century South, as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Through her three marriages and interactions with the community, Janie challenges societal norms and explores themes of love, identity, and freedom. Hurston's rich use of dialect and folklore celebrates Black culture and resilience.

2. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Set after the Civil War, this powerful novel explores the haunting legacy of slavery through the story of Sethe, a former enslaved woman. Morrison delves into themes of memory, trauma, and motherly love, blending magical realism with historical fiction. Like Hurston, Morrison gives voice to Black women's experiences with lyrical and evocative prose.

3. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

This epistolary novel follows Celie, an African American woman in the rural South, as she overcomes oppression and abuse to find her own voice. Through letters to God and her sister, Celie's journey echoes themes of self-realization, sisterhood, and empowerment similar to Janie's story. Walker's work is a seminal text in Black feminist literature.

4. *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Exploring friendship and community, this novel centers on two Black women, Sula and Nel, whose lives diverge in a small Ohio town. Morrison examines complex themes of identity, loyalty, and societal expectations, much like Hurston's focus on individualism and cultural roots. The narrative challenges traditional notions of morality and female

relationships.

5. *Passing* by Nella Larsen

Set in the Harlem Renaissance, this novella explores the lives of two mixed-race women who "pass" as white in different ways. Larsen's work addresses themes of racial identity, societal pressure, and the fluidity of self, paralleling Hurston's interest in race and personal freedom. The psychological depth and social critique make it a compelling companion to Hurston's work.

6. *Jazz* by Toni Morrison

This novel uses the backdrop of 1920s Harlem to tell a story of love, betrayal, and redemption within the African American community. Morrison's rich, poetic language and exploration of Black culture's vibrancy recall Hurston's style and themes. The narrative structure, blending past and present, highlights the complexities of human relationships.

7. *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen

This novel follows Helga Crane, a mixed-race woman struggling to find belonging between Black and white worlds. Larsen explores themes of alienation, identity, and societal expectations with nuance and empathy. Like Hurston, Larsen's work contributes to the Harlem Renaissance's literary examination of race and gender.

8. *God's Bits of Wood* by Ousmane Sembène

Though set in colonial Senegal, this novel's focus on a labor strike and the role of women in social change resonates with Hurston's themes of resistance and empowerment. Sembène portrays collective struggle and individual courage, highlighting African cultural pride and the fight for dignity, complementing Hurston's celebration of heritage.

9. *The Street* by Ann Petry

This novel tells the story of Lutie Johnson, a Black woman trying to survive and protect her son in 1940s Harlem. Petry addresses systemic racism, poverty, and gender oppression with a gritty realism that parallels Hurston's exploration of Black womanhood. The book is a poignant look at the challenges and resilience in urban Black life.

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