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## To the Horizon and Back: Janie’s Journey in Zora Neale Hurstons’ *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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**Abstract:** Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937, is about a woman’s search for love and identity in a black community. The novel portrays an African American woman’s struggle to find her own voice through love in a society that tried to silence women. The main character, Janie Crawford, lives in a black community that looked at women as equivalent to “mules” as described by the author herself. The novel is set in several different places which have an important impact on Janie’s life and her journey from her grandmother’s place to the horizon at the end of the novel. This paper explores the journey that Janie goes through in the course of the novel, the people she meets in those places and their effect on her emerging personality, and how she transforms herself from a silent figure to a self-independent woman with a strong voice. Of course, Janie’s journey reflects the journeys of many other women who go through the same struggles and face similar communities.



**Keywords:** Hurston, Black Women, Journey, Horizon, Love, Black Community.

Women have always been considered secondary to their male counterparts. They were often being considered objects to be owned by others, rather than individuals with dreams and desires. This was the case with women, especially with African-American women living in the United States during the beginning of the twentieth century. They had to deal with not only gender issues, but also racial issues. Feminism is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way”<sup>1</sup>. Hurston’s novel is a feminist work in which Janie progresses throughout the novel to find liberation and independence through working for herself rather than working for her husband. By the end of the novel, she defies the stereotypes by wearing overalls, which was unaccepted by her society. She wasn’t only black, but she was a woman, and this was enough to make her a victim subjected by her society.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) starts in Eatonville and then moves to several other places which have an important impact on the protagonist's journey throughout her life. Some of these places are visible, and some are invisible, and all of them serve as a station in Janie Crawford's life in which she finds the true meaning of love and her own identity as a self-independent woman. At the beginning of the novel, Janie is presented as a young and innocent African-American girl, and over the course of many years and three marriages, she grows to understand who she is as a woman, where her place in the

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of “feminism” from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press (4<sup>th</sup> Edition).



world is, and succeeds in achieving her dream of finding unconditional love and independence. Hurston's plots often deal with the main character's journey throughout life to self-realization and self-discovery in a patriarchal society. Jennifer Jordan argues:

The novel is seen as a vehicle of feminist protest through its condemnation of the restrictiveness of bourgeois marriage and through its exploration of intraracial sexism and male violence. It is seen as a quest through which the heroine, Janie Killicks Starks Woods, achieves a sense of identity as a self-fulfilled woman and, through her own self-realization, becomes a leader of women and of her community.<sup>2</sup>

My thesis for this paper deals with the places and the world surrounding Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and how each place and its people affect Janie's journey through life and lead her to discover who she is. It is important to address this issue because Janie's life represents the journey of many other black women searching for their inner self and voice by going through several different phases in life. Zahra Mahdian Fard and Bahman Zarrinjooee state in their article that "from very early childhood Janie is conscious about her own self and identity"<sup>3</sup>, and this is first presented under the pear tree where she starts the journey of finding herself.

The novel reveals the black female's struggle for voice, and her evolution from a silent figure to a voiced, self-independent, and positive person with human identity. Literally, Janie's journey starts under the blossoming pear tree in Nanny's backyard at the age of sixteen, and goes to the potato farm with Logan Killicks, then moves to Eatonville with Joe Starks, and later with Tea Cake to the Everglades muck, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Jordan. "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol 7, No. 1 (1988), p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Zahra Mahdian Fard and Bahman Zarrinjooee. "A Quest for Identity in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*". *International Journal of Literature and Art*, (2014) 2(4) p. 49.



finally back to her home in Eatonville where she finally reaches the horizon she first saw under that pear tree and wanted to reach for. The environments and the people she meets are different in each place and affect Janie and lead her to self-discovery towards the end of the novel.

At the beginning of her journey, Janie is infatuated with a blossoming pear tree in Nanny's back yard, and she spends much of her time under that tree. At the branches of the pear tree, she finds the true meaning of love that she wants to experience in her own life. And it's under the pear tree that Janie initiates her quest for true love and self-independence. It was in that day that she witnessed true love. Hurston states:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation." (Hurston 11)<sup>4</sup>

She witnesses a perfect union of harmony within nature under the tree, and she realizes that she wants to achieve this type of love; a love that is so pure and feels at one with the world, and it's from there that she initiates her journey. Thus, and after this revelation, Janie starts searching for answers for her so many questions. She wants to have a sense of belonging in the place, that was Nanny's house, but she cannot find any. Hurston portrays Janie's sense of loneliness at the beginning of the novel through the use of nature, she states "Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her." (11) she knows that she must search elsewhere, that there is a place somewhere that is hers and where she can find the answers for all her questions. But this will take a great deal of her lifetime.

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<sup>4</sup>All reference to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are made to the New York Perennial Classics, 1999 edition.



In her marriage, Janie wants things and feelings to be sweet like the time she used to spend under the pear tree and think. She states that she "wanted things sweet with [her] marriage, lak when you sit under a pear tree and think." (24) But she does not get this sweetness in her marriage with Logan Killicks and does not get it with Joe Starks either when she elopes with him and becomes the mayor's wife. But when Tea Cake comes along with his simple life and easy manners, she gets that sweetness she once witnessed under the blossoming pear tree though for a short time as death ends Tea Cake's life.

The tree also stands as a metaphor or a symbol for Janie's whole life. Hurston even describes Janie as a tree herself when she states that "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (8). Thus, this suggests that Janie relates to nature, and that she is trying to find her identity through it. suggest in their article that "[Janie's] identification with the pear tree connects her with a powerful archetype, the archetype of *feminine beauty, sexual power, and fertility* and of *immortality*"<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, nature and the pear tree give her power and guide her to find her identity in the novel.

She sees the horizon and decides to make a journey to that invisible place one day which is going to resemble her whole life, and this journey is the principal metaphor in the novel. To her, it's a goal that she would keep moving to reach throughout the novel. Janie's first two marriages end in disappointment in which she can't fulfill her dreams and can't find love and respect from both husbands. But Tea Cake, her third husband and first true love, reminds her of a pear a tree blossom in spring. And even when she kills him in self-defense, he lives in her memory, an invisible place in which he dwells forever.

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<sup>5</sup> Leila Hajjari and Hossein Aliakbari Harehdasht. "The Legacy of Romanticism: The Pear Tree and Jaine Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*". *Journal of African American Studies*. Volume 20, Issue 1, p. 40.



The horizon is identified at the beginning of the novel as a place where people spend their lives traveling to, which they think they will find their dreams at. The novel opens with a description of ships sailing to the horizon, those ships have “everyman’s wish on board” (1). And the ships themselves represent people and their lives in which they stop at different stations before they reach their final horizon. And for some, their lives might end before they reach that place.

And that is Janie Crawford's life in which she goes the distance and endures many things and meet many people who try to identify her according to what they want and try to make her nothing but an object for their own needs and achievements and what they want for themselves. Her grandmother, Nanny, marries her to an old farm man who would provide her with security and 60 acres of potato farm. She wants to achieve through Janie what she wanted to achieve to her daughter, Janie's mother. Janie is just another child for Nanny whom she could raise according to what she wants, for her, security and economic settlement are more important than love in marriage.

As for Logan Killicks, the farm man and Janie's first husband, he sees Janie as a young spoiled girl who is supposed to grow to a responsible woman and help him in the farm work like what his first wife used to do. He treats her as he would treat a mule, with no respect and no understanding. He identifies her according to what he believes or wants in a wife, and he compares her to his first wife who used to help him in the farm work without complaint or rejection to the work. He complains, "Mah fust wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood nohow. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten." (26)

Nature seems to have a great source of inspiration to Zora Neale Hurston in her earlier works, and its influence remains up until her later novels. So, there is no wonder that the image of the horizon has this big impact in the novel. The horizon represents the far-off mystery of the natural world, and it's an invisible place



which Janie wishes to reach. The pear tree and the horizon stand for beauty and pleasure. Throughout the novel, the horizon functions as an important symbol which represents imagination and limitless possibility of life that Janie wishes to have, opposed to the ones that she had with Nanny, Logan and Joe. The image of the horizon plays different roles in the novel; it stands as a metaphor for an invisible place where Janie wishes to reach, and it also symbolizes Janie's search for happiness, and a new day for the porch sitters when they sit on the porches at sundown after a hard day's work looking for a new day.

At the potato farm, where she marries Logan Killicks, Janie is miserable and extremely lonely and unhappy. She cannot find what she expected in marriage; there is no love between her and Logan, and no matter how she tries she cannot love him. He is pragmatic and so unromantic, and he treats her with no respect or understanding. And she is judged negatively by him, as well as Joe Starks and the porch sitters later in the novel.

Janie and Logan's marriage lacks the emotions and understanding that she is searching for in a marriage, therefore, she leaves him and runs away with Joe Starks whom she thought is better than Logan and who "spoke for far horizon" (29), and might provide her with the love, respect and the independence that she wants.

As for Joe Starks, he is a courageous, successful and self-made man, who has made his dreams come true during the novel by building the town and establishing himself as the mayor of it. He is good with the townspeople and great in their eyes rather than in Janie's eyes. When it comes to treating her, he is bad and manipulative, he even forces her to wear ugly head rags to cover her beautiful hair in fear that someone else might come and take her away from him just like what he did with Logan. Janie thought that this might be the man of her dreams and true love, but soon after she finds out the opposite about him.



He treats Janie badly and overpowers her until his death. She is nothing more than an object for him to show off his possession of her and his own success, but he never understands or respects her. And though she suffers a lot during the long years of this marriage, she grows a wiser woman after his death and comes to realize her individual identity.

When Joe first meets Janie while she was working in the barn, he praises her beauty and says that someone like her should not work behind a plow, and states that "A pretty baby-doll lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." (29). But when he marries her and goes to live in Eatonville, he does not even let her sit on the porch and share the conversations and stories with the other people. He argues:

you'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' stability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in. 'Tain't no earthly use. They's jus' some puny humans playin' round de toes uh Time. (54)

Soon after their marriage, Janie starts to have the sense that her dream with Joe might get crushed and fades away again. He starts to talk in a way that is different from how he used to talk to her before they got married. He belittles her in front of the townspeople by saying that she does not know anything about speech-making and that she is a woman and her place is in the home. He says that "[his] wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place in de home" (43). This is also ironic because he makes her work at the store instead of staying at home when he becomes the mayor and starts to get busy. It takes Janie her whole marriage with Joe to break out from her silence and fear and his control over her. Her image of him shatters over the years of their marriage and her dreams die with that, she has no more "blossomy openings dusting pollen" (72) for Joe and her love for him is gone forever. She transforms from an object to a subject and grows to be an independent woman, though it is only after his death that she feels happy and finally free.





The image of burning the head rags and setting her hair loose after Joe's death resembles Janie's emancipation from the control of her husband and the beginning of a new life for her. And though she probably doesn't know what to do with this new freedom at the beginning, she is extremely happy and feels her new independence which is a feeling that she hasn't experienced before as neither Nanny nor Logan or Joe gave her any kind of independence or control over her life.

The porches in the novel serve as a metaphor for many different things in the novel. First, the porches are places where the people in the novel sit at the end of the day's work and talk with each other. Hurston describes the setting in a romantic way when she says "The sun was gone, but he has left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting at the porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk." (1). Storytelling is part of the African-American folklore and traditional life, and it's used widely in the novel; the story in the novel is narrated by a third person which shows the nature of the storytelling in the book, Janie's telling of her story and journey to her friend, Pheoby, and the nature of the talk the porch sitters do on the porches every day, which is, stories.

The porches themselves serve as a place where storytelling is made. Janie's story is told to her friend on the porch in Janie's house, it's also a place for recreation for the people at the muck when they use to gather around Janie and Tea Cake's home every night to talk and exchange stories. And for the porch sitters in Eatonville, it is mostly a place where the sitters would sit and pass judgment on others, especially Janie. They are used to judging her by her looks and the way she acts, and judging her relationship with her husband, Joe Starks, and later her relationship with Tea Cake when she marries him and when she comes back in overalls after his death.

Janie feels that she is helpless, there is a war inside of her and she can't do anything about it. She feels that "People ought to have some regard for helpless things." (57). The porch sitters envy her for being the



mayor's wife, even Joe himself thinks that he is doing the best for her and that he is building a high place for her to sit on and brag about her good life, but nobody knows about this suffering that is going on inside her being a helpless person. She states that she "hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along." (57). She just does not talk and keeps silent until shortly before Joe's death.

The porch sitters continue engaging themselves in discussions and giving preliminary judgments on Janie. They scorn her for her pride, for being the mayor's wife even though they do not know what kind of miserable life she is having with him. And they also scorn her for marrying a man younger than her after Joe's death and for returning in overalls and loose, beautiful hair after his death. They keep passing the judgments on her even without knowing anything about her side of the story. Janie is aware of the porch sitters' judgments and criticism of her, but at the beginning she cannot do anything about it as Joe used to forbid her from engaging in conversations with them. And being the helpless one, she does not do anything about it until she returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death and tells her story to Pheoby knowing that Pheoby will, in return, tell it to the porch sitters, hoping at that time they will judge her fairly. All of Eatonville, Joe Starks and the porch sitters help Janie in some way in her transformation during the novel. She lives there for about twenty years in silence and helplessness enduring everything from everyone, but prior to Joe's death she is no longer silent and no longer accepting the way Joe manipulates her. She breaks out from the shell of silence and passivity to independence and self-control of her own life.

The story of the mule's struggle and the liberation it gets when Joe buys it reflects, in an interesting way, Janie's own life. She struggles under the burden that her grandmother, Nanny, imposes on her. Nanny once stated that "De nigger women is de mule uh de world" (14), and this statemen reflects Nany's idea of black women, and how she wants Janie to have the same idea about herself. Nanny herself was treated badly as a slave and suffered a lot in her life, and so was her daughter who was raped by a school teacher. Thus,



she didn't want Janie to go through the same thing. And though Janie was not raped and did not suffer from slavery, she is treated like a mule by almost everyone in her life; her grandmother burdens her with a marriage that is not an option for Janie, a husband who treats her like a mule and wants to put her behind a plow with no understanding or respect, and a second husband who is no better than the first one and who also treats her as a mule by manipulating her and controlling everything in her life and making her a slave for him.

Janie herself associates with the mule and feels sorry for it and scorns the porch sitters and her husband's mocking of the mule that she once murmurs that those people have no understanding of the helplessness of things like the mule. She herself understand it because she feels the same, " a mule uh de world" (14).

However, at the muck with Tea Cake, Janie's third husband, the situation is different and is much better than before. She is treated differently there and has a sense of liberation and independence and a feeling of her own place in the world. And she even participates in the talk of the people during their gatherings. Hurston states that "the men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she would listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest." (127-128) And Tea Cake tries to do the best for her so that she doesn't regret her decision of marrying him, but she is so satisfied with her life with him that she states "... don't keer where you at. Ah'm wid mah husband in uh storm, dat's all." (159)

And though Tea Cake is poorer than her and she is much older than him, she doesn't mind it and seems satisfied in her life and her position with him. They are both equal and are on the same level, and he includes her in things that she wasn't allowed to do before because of her gender; he teaches her how to play chess with him and how to use the gun and shoot. And most of all, she is happy because he treats her as an equal; she has got what she wanted with him. Now she has her own life and lives it the way she likes, not the way



Nanny or the others wanted her to live. During her marriages she has been looking for love and to be loved truly, not to be owned or possessed by someone, and it is Tea Cake who gives her this kind of love, and she becomes liberated with him and becomes who she is. She can experience something new and to let herself be free. She finally finds her romantic pear tree blossoms.

In her three marriages, Janie travels through different arrays of social classes, and none of them satisfies her except Tea Cake who is probably the best one among them. He is the very opposite of the bourgeois Joe and the rural Logan, and she is with him she feels free to mix herself with the people and experience what they are, and most importantly, what she is.

The influences of other people in Janie's life affect her decisions, she cannot decide for herself during most of the course of the novel. Though she does not love Logan and does not want to marry him, she cannot do the opposite as Nanny's influence is affective in her life and she ends up marrying an old man whom she doesn't love and barely know just because of Nanny's influence. She doesn't want to live her life in suffering like Nanny, and that's a reason that makes her accept to marry Logan.

On the other hand, marrying Logan and living with him for about a year also affects Janie's life and has its influence on her. She doesn't find love in her marriage with him and her dream of finding love in marriage dies soon after that. Logan himself starts to treat her passively, more like treating an object of no entity, and the marriage becomes an image of slavery to her. Then suddenly Joe Starks shows up from nowhere and represents the ideal lover that she has been dreaming of. Giving the fact of Logan's bad treatment of her and Joe's presence and good impact on her she decides to leave Logan for good and run away with Joe to marry him.

But shortly after marrying Joe, the image of this ideal lover starts to crack and shatter again, and the dream dies once more. His influence might be the biggest one in her life because his big voice makes her



silent during the long years of their marriage. She becomes submissive to him, but deep within she is screaming and wishes to do something to take out her voice within. And Joe's treatment of her, which is no better than Logan's, leads her to finally make her decision of standing against him and declaring her own control over her life and the end of his aggressive reign. His death leaves her a newer and a wiser woman, and though she doesn't find love in this second marriage as well, she finds her own independence at its end.

And after Joe's death, Janie gets to meet Tea Cake and decides to marry him after some time. Janie and Tea Cake go to live in the Everglades and work in the muck side by side, refusing the status and the influence of Eatonville and its people because they desire to know and love each other without external effects on them. Janie's life with Tea Cake represents the final step in her journey for the horizon towards self-discovery, and for her, Tea cake is the embodiment of the freedom which she has been searching for long ago. He makes her feel alive, loved, free and unlimited.

The storm towards the end of the novel represents Janie's one last move to the horizon, and it symbolizes the entire final struggle she must deal with in order to reach that place of her own, although without Tea Cake by her side, but totally free and independent. Learning how to shoot, Janie becomes a self-sufficient woman and becomes able to protect herself against the most unpredictable and tragic accident by Tea Cake himself.

Though the death of Tea Cake is unjust to both Tea Cake and Janie and leaves everything unbalanced and incomprehensible, it helps taking Janie to her final station in her journey; the horizon she has been searching for. And unfortunately, for a new thing to begin something else must end, and so the end of Tea Cake's life brings an end to Janie's marriage and life with her true love yet gives her a new beginning and a final station to claim her freedom and identity from everyone and everything around her and to be an independent black woman free of other people's judgments and identifications of her.



Back on the porch in her house in Eatonville, she tells her friend Pheoby that she has been to the horizon at last and now she is back here to her house which does not feel empty, and she doesn't feel lonely anymore. Her return is not a defeat as what the porch sitters describe it to be. On the contrary, she returns a powerful woman and full of knowledge and wisdom. She states, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom." (191) She even inspires her friend and makes her want to go to her husband and ask him to take her for fishing like what Janie and Tea Cake used to do. Janie's journey is an inspiration for all women to find their own love, to find the voice that lies deep within their souls and to discover who they are and what their place in the world is.

Janie survives a succession of marriages and identities imposed on her by others, and at the end of the novel she becomes empowered to tell her own story and to become a source of inspiration and a model of powerful and self-identified woman.

In the last scene in the novel where she is in her room back in Eatonville, Janie finally feels at peace with herself and she feels that she had achieved what she wanted in her life. She found the true and unconditional love she's been searching for in her whole life, and she found the spiritual enlightenment and strong sense of her own identity. Hurston describes the horizon in this scene as a net when she says, "[Janie] pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see." (193) She achieves a personal fulfillment and makes a final and spiritual reunion with her own world and with the spirit of Tea Cake whom she feels its presence around her in the place.



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