



Their Eyes Were Watching God

By Zora Neale Hurston
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Plot Summary

Under "a blossoming pear tree" in West Florida, sixteen-year-old Janie Mae Crawford dreams of a world that will answer all her questions and waits "for the world to be made." But her grandmother, who has raised her from birth, arranges Janie's marriage to an older local farmer. So begins Janie's journey toward herself and toward the farthest horizon open to her. Zora Neale Hurston's classic 1937 novel follows Janie from her Nanny's plantation shack, to Logan Killicks's farm, to all-black Eatonville, to the Everglades, and back to Eatonville--where she gathers in "the great fish-net" of her life. Janie's joyless marriage to Killicks lasts until Joe Starks passes by, on his way to becoming "a big voice." Joe becomes mayor of Eatonville and is just as determined as Killicks was to keep Janie in her proper place. Through twenty years with Joe, she continues to cope, hope, and dream; and after Joe's death, she is once again "ready for her great journey," a journey she now undertakes with one Vergible Woods, a.k.a. Tea Cake. Younger than Janie, Tea Cake nevertheless engages both her heart and her spirit. With him Janie can finally enjoy life without being one man's mule or another's bauble. Their eventful life together "on de muck" of the Everglades eventually brings Janie to another of her life's turning points; and after

burying Tea Cake, she returns to a gossip-filled Eatonville, where she tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson, and releases Pheoby to tell that story to the others. Janie has "done been tuh de horizon and back." She has learned what love is; she has experienced life's joys and sorrows; and she has come home to herself in peace.

Discussion Topics

1. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What is the nature of that God and of their watching? Do any of them question God?
2. What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?
3. How does Janie's journey--from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades--represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions? What elements of individual action and communal life characterize that immersion?
4. To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice?
5. What are the differences between the language of the men and that of Janie and the other women? How do the differences in language reflect the two groups' approaches to life, power, relationships, and self-realization? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
6. In what ways does Janie conform to or diverge from the assumptions that underlie the men's attitudes toward women? How would you explain Hurston's depiction of violence toward women? Does the novel substantiate Janie's statement that "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business"?
7. What is the importance in the novel of the "signifyin'" and "playin' de dozens" on the front porch of Joe's store and elsewhere? What purpose do these stories, traded insults, exaggerations, and boasts have in the lives of these people? How does Janie counter them with her conjuring?
8. Why is adherence to received tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?
9. After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her." Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others?
10. How important is Hurston's use of vernacular dialect to our understanding of Janie and the other characters and their way of life? What do speech patterns reveal about the quality of these lives and the nature of these communities? In what ways are "their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon" of these people?