

ZORA NEALE HURSTON: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Study Guide For Further Reading Discussion Questions

Study Guide (1992) for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
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"Time and place have had their say," Hurston tells us in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. About the time, Hurston remained secretive, telling readers simply that she did "get born." About the place, however, and about the significance of growing up in Eatonville, Florida, Hurston was never secretive.

Certainly Eatonville in the early years of this century was anything but typical of Black communities in America. The only incorporated all Black town in the U.S., Eatonville demonstrated to Hurston on a daily basis that Blacks could be independent, self-governing, successful, and in control. In Eatonville, race problems remained at one remove from Hurston's experience. Of course, Eatonville was not paradise; just beyond the town boundaries lay the white world that influenced, for good or bad, life in Eatonville. But race relations in Eatonville seemed different from race relations in other southern black communities. Equally important to Hurston, her mother fought to give her the freedom to "look white folks right in the face" and set out for the horizon; she never discouraged Hurston's storytelling and inventiveness, even in the face of her grandmother's repeated predictions that Zora's lying and sassiness would lead to nothing but sorrow.

In Eatonville, the spirituals, tales, and speech rhythms of Black folk culture formed the very atmosphere that gave Hurston life, and she experienced that culture with few reminders that the white community (and educated Blacks, for that matter) looked down on it as inferior or, at best, primitive. But to Hurston, Br'er Rabbit and Sis Chicken, John and Old Master, and the lying session on Joe Clark's store porch remained expressions of a dynamic culture. And when, after a long struggle to educate herself, Hurston graduated from Barnard College in anthropology, Black folk culture became her vocation. Working under the supervision of noted anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston set off to collect Black folk tales in southern timber camps, jook joints, and store porches and to study

voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti. Eventually she published the results of her field work in *Mules and Men* (1934).

Mules and Men, a hybrid creature, half folklore collection and half novel, reflects an important tension in Hurston's life between anthropology and art. It is not surprising, then, that after *Mules and Men* Hurston turned to more purely literary uses of her folk material, although she returned temporarily to anthropology with *Tell My Horse* (1938). In her literary work, Hurston was part of the Harlem Renaissance, a collection of novelists, poets, dramatists, painters, sculptors, dancers and composers. These artists attempted to demonstrate that Blacks could produce works of art equal to those of any other culture. Through their work, these artists hoped to address what was then called the "Race Problem," although they never agreed on how best to serve both politics and art. Hurston contributed to the Harlem Renaissance by demonstrating the power of Black folk culture and language. In her short stories and novels, as well as in her staging of "authentic" Black musicals, Black folklore and lifestyle showed its power and dignity to the world.

Hurston's most famous and best novel is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which Blyden Jackson calls "one of the finest novels written by an American Black." Written in Haiti while she was doing fieldwork, it "embalmed," Hurston claimed, all her passion for her recently abandoned lover. More importantly, the work combines two central themes from Hurston's life: her search for independence and fulfillment and her love for Black folk culture.

The first of these themes is reflected throughout the novel in Janie Crawford's search for freedom and fulfillment. Having married Logan Killicks because her grandmother wants Janie to have the security and stability that had been unavailable to black women under slavery, Janie learns that she seeks more from life than the conventional "protection" that Logan offers. To find that "more," Janie leaves Logan for Joe Starks, but she finds that Joe too is unable to provide what she needs. After he becomes mayor of Eatonville, Joe demands that Janie behave only in ways he considers appropriate to the mayor's wife; he insists that Janie separate herself from the things and the people she loves. In her final marriage, to Tea Cake Woods, Janie finally finds both the freedom and the fulfillment that she has been seeking. The lesson that a Black woman can carve out for herself such an existence is what Janie brings back with her to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death. The novel's positive and sympathetic treatment of a

woman's struggles for freedom and fulfillment makes this work important; its celebration of black women's struggles for fulfillment makes it a groundbreaking work. Only in the past three decades have Black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara taken Hurston's example to heart in their treatment of Black women's experience.

Equally important is Hurston's use of black folk culture. Much of the beauty of the novel's language comes from Hurston's reproduction of the idioms and the figures of southern Black speech. Characters speak in the folk idioms—"Gal, it's too good! you switches a mean fanny round in a kitchen"and Hurston herself incorporates the rhythms and idioms of black speech in her descriptions—"Old Nanny sat there rocking Janie like an infant and thinking back and back. Mind-pictures brought feelings, and feelings dragged out dramas from the hollows of her heart." Hurston also celebrates the lying contests, the storytelling, and the folk humor, as in the stories about Matt Bonner's yellow mule and the funeral the town gives for the mule. On a deeper level, folk culture patterns help structure the work. John Callahan has recently demonstrated that the interplay of voices in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* grow out of the African-American call and response tradition. As the novel progresses, the voices reflect the growing intimacy of thought and feeling between Janie and her friend Phoebe and between Janie and the narrator. In her treatment of black folk culture, Hurston succeeds in demonstrating its inventiveness and importance. Gone are the bumbling, foot-shuffling incompetents. Gone are the kindly paternal whites who protect the Blacks. And largely gone are the vicious racists (the novel does acknowledge the realities of race relations in the 1930s, but those race problems never become the driving force of the novel). Rather, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* looks at black life on its own terms, with an eye to its beauty and vitality.

Hurston's success in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes largely from her ability to tie these two strands of her work together so intimately. Janie's struggles for independence and love can only succeed, the work suggests, when Janie can quit languishing on the high seat where everyone tries to place her and become an active participant in Black folk culture. In Janie's affirmation of both herself and her culture, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* clearly made a difference.

For Further Reading

By Zora Neale Hurston (Dates are original publication date.)

Mules and Men (1935)

Dust Tracks on a Road (1942)

I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader (1979)

About Zora Neale Hurston

Callahan, John F. "'Mah tongue Is in Mah Friend's Mouf': The Rhetoric of Intimacy and Immensity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction*, 115–149. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977. (Hemenway's biography is still the standard source for information about Hurston's life.)

Howard, Lillie P. *Zora Neale Hurston*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980. (Howard's work provides a brief assessment of Hurston's life and of her works.)

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. (Still a useful general introduction to the Harlem Renaissance.)

Walker, Alice. "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, pp. 83–92. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Discussion Questions for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

1. What "American characters"--in both the individual and the cultural senses--do you find in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?
2. Early in the novel, Janie experiences a moment of awakening while lying under a pear tree. Versions of that pear tree image form an important motif in the novel. What does the image mean? What uses does Hurston make of the image in other parts of the novel?
3. Hurston incorporates a number of folk tales into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What function does this folk material serve in the novel?
4. The novel presents and tests at least three different understandings of marriage. Explain these different understandings. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
5. One critic has argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has an "awkward" structure because Janie is forced to narrate to Phoebe events with which Phoebe must already be familiar. Is the structure of the novel a problem? What positive purpose does Janie's narrating events with which Phoebe must already be familiar serve in the novel?
6. How does the language of the narrator reflect a growing sense of intimacy with Janie?
7. Janie's ability to become a full participant in black folk culture makes it possible for her to find the freedom she seeks. In what ways does the folk culture help Janie succeed in her search?
8. Hurston's novel fails to confront explicitly the problem of black/white relations. Yet Hurston dramatizes the many ways in which racial tensions surface within the black community. What evidence of this racial tension do you find? What were the reasons for these tensions? How does Hurston's treatment of prejudices among blacks contribute to the theme of the novel? In what ways do white/black relations enter the novel?

9. Alice Walker has observed that one of Hurston's most attractive features is her "racial health—a sense of Black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." From your reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* how do you understand Hurston's attitude toward race?

10. For some years now *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been growing in popularity. What features of the work, in your opinion, have made this novel an enduring classic? What about the novel makes it appeal to readers today?

11. Traditionally readers think of works by men when they think of American classics. Might there also be a distinctly female American classic? Although Hurston and Dickinson come from different times and very different cultures, do they share a female perspective that sets them apart from the male writers you have read so far? How would you characterize that female perspective, if you see one?

12. Twain and Hurston both draw on folk culture in their novels. What important similarities and differences do you see in their use of folk culture materials?