ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S EARLY FEMINISM

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Abstract: Their Eyes Were Watching God is Zora Neale Hurston's best romance. Its language is poetic without being folksy, its structure loose without being disjointed, its characters stylized without being exotic, and its theme of personal wholeness centered on egalitarianism in living and loving, especially in heterosexual relationships. As in Jonah's Gourd Vine, the third-person omniscient narrator and characters frequently speak in folk metaphors and evoke colorful nature images. The narrator's most vivid metaphors appear in descriptions of sunrise and sunset, such as, "The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky" and "Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town." Physical and human nature are organically related thematic signs.

Keywords: romance, feminism, egalitarianism, relationship, description

That Zora Neale Hurston was (re-) discovered by Alice Walker is an undeniable fact. As a writer, Alice Walker has found in Hurston's fiction and folklore an empowering legacy. Walker set out on her journey in search of the woman herself. She met people that had known Hurston, but their recollections were contradictory or dim. The essay that records Walker's pilgrimage is entitled "Looking for Zora." Its title and its structure demonstrate the difficulty of finding out the truth about Hurston, a woman who regularly misrepresented the facts about her life. Most profoundly, the essay conveys the power of the legacy that speaks from the grave, as it were, to respond to Walker's call. That legacy has been reclaimed not only by Alice Walker, who edited the first anthology of Hurston's writing, but also by a generation of African American writers and feminist critics and scholars who have begun to restore Hurston's work to its rightful place among the literary traditions of the United States. As the author of seven books, Hurston was more prolific than any black woman writer before her. She published four novels, two volumes of folklore and an autobiography, as well as more than fifty short stories, essays, and plays.

Robert Hemenway has reconstructed the fascinating story of her life in a meticulously researched biography, and numerous monographs, critical essays, articles, and bibliographies have been published about Hurston and her work. The superb biography by Robert Hemenway and the feminist movement's reassessment of her literary significance, spearheaded by Alice Walker, has led to the retrieval from obscurity of Hurston's two books of folklore; her three romances, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and her novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). Most significantly, Hurston's influence on African American literary tradition continues to grow.

Due to its poetic language, loose structure, stylized characters and its theme of personal wholeness centered on egalitarianism in living and loving, especially in heterosexual relationships, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been widely acclaimed as the best of Zora

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Neale Hurston's romances. As in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the third-person omniscient narrator and characters frequently speak in folk metaphors and evoke colorful nature images. The narrator's most vivid metaphors appear in descriptions of sunrise and sunset, such as, "The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky" and "Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town." Physical and human nature are organically related thematic signs.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is Janie Crawford's life story as she tells it to her friend, Phoeby Watson. As she talks, Janie is encouraged by "Phoeby's hungry listening" to shape and interpret her experiences. Her conscious life began, she decides, on a spring afternoon in West Florida when a boy tried to kiss her over her grandmother's gatepost. This evidence of Janie's awakening sexuality alarms her grandmother. She wants Janie to be the respectable wife of a man with property and so she marries her off to a middle- aged farmer, Logan Killicks. Nanny assumes that this marriage will prevent man from treating Janie as a "spit cup". She defies him and runs off with Joe Starks, a handsome man whose ambitious visions represent escape to her. Like Nanny and Killicks, Starks expects Janie to play a role in his story. As Starks' wife, Janie gains the security and respect Nanny has prized yet discovers that it does not fulfill her. It is in rejecting her grandmother's conservative view of security that Janie finds her happiness. She falls in love with a younger man, Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods, and goes to work side by side with him as a migrant farmhand. The novel's climax is violent and dramatic. A hurricane floods the area: in protecting Janie, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog that turns out to have been rabid. Janie saves her own life by killing Tea Cake. Although, she is tried for murder, she is acquitted by an all-white jury and returns, weary but satisfied to live with her thoughts and to tell her story.

The metaphorical style gives poetic intensity to the theme of sexual politics, which is expressed in the opening paragraphs of the narrative:

"Ships at a distance have everyman's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly." (p. 5).

The inner forces that control the lives of men and women are different; some are driven by the need to possess things; others are moved by the need for a mutual relationship to share with people. Thus the dramatic tension in the narrative occurs between the efforts of Janie Mae Crawford, the heroine, to fulfill her dreams as a "coffee-and-cream" complexioned rural woman, and the conventions of a male-dominated, lower middle-class society that frustrate the realization of her romantic vision of love and fulfillment until she meets Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods.

The central episodes of the primary narrative, which is framed by Janie's passing on her story to her friend Pheoby and the fusion of symbols of natural and personal harmony, focus on the three men who challenge Janie's youthful concept of love and personal fulfillment. The first is Logan Killicks, an older man with property whom her plantation-born grandmother compels her to marry at sixteen so that men would not make "a work-ox," "a

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brood-sow," or "a spit cup" of her. With her unattractive, unromantic first husband, Janie learned that "marriage did not make love." The second is adventurous Joe Starks, who "did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (p. 28). Charmed into bigamy by Joe's dream of becoming "a big voice" in all-black Eatonville and by his whirlwind courtship, Janie is gradually robbed of her own dream by her second husband's authoritarianism, vanity, and abuse. With the death of Joe Starks and her youth, Tea Cake comes into her life, and her dream is fulfilled. A fun-loving, guitar-playing, crap-shooting, knife-carrying handsome young migrant, "he looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring. . . . He was a glance from God" (p. 90). Janie and Tea Cake marry and move to the Everglades, where they share the intense joy of working, playing, and living among black migrant workers. But in "the meanest moment of eternity," Janie kills her rabies-mad third husband in self-defense after the gun he aims at her misfires three times.

The major problems in the narrative are the awkward handling of point of view, especially the moral and emotional distance between the protagonist and her grandmother, and of time structure. Choosing to mix third-person omniscient, dramatic, and first-person modes of presentation, the implied author begins the framed story in the first chapter with the omniscient narrator metaphorically setting the mood, introducing the theme, and dramatizing the conflict between her enlightened, independent central character and the inhibiting conventions of her folk community. Grounded in the oral tradition of Southern blacks, from the gossip about Janie by the "mouthy" Eatonville community to the tales about Big John the Conqueror by "the great flame-throwers" in the Everglades, the plot begins nearly twenty-four years after the events to be narrated have taken place. With Janie's confident, content return after a year and a half to the curious, gossipy community of Eatonville, the stage is set for her to tell her close friend Pheoby, with whom she has "been kissin' friends for twenty years," about the events leading to her return. "'To start off wid,'" Janie says, "'people like dem wastes up too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about. Now they got to look into me loving Tea Cake and see whether it was done right or not! They don't know if life is a mess of cornmeal dumplings, and if love is a bed-quilt!'" (Pp. 9-10).

Rather than Janie's first-person narration taking over from this point, the implied author switches half-way into the second chapter to the point of view of Janie's grandmother Nanny, and in the third and subsequent chapters the omniscient narrator controls the flow of past events. Although this heightens the dramatic impact of Nanny's character, it diminishes the reader's emotional involvement with and moral sympathy for Janie, who boldly asserts the power to speak in a signifying confrontation with Joe Starks in chapters six and seven, but whose first-person narration resumes only in the close of the frame in the final two pages of the story. On the other hand, Hurston's mixture of points of view and time gives her more latitude to introduce farce, a mock-heroic funeral, and folktales into the narrative, especially in the sixth chapter.

A closer look at the relationship between Nanny and Janie reveals that the implied author philosophically and emotionally identifies with her protagonist's rejection of her family as she pursues love and adventure. Raised until six in the backyard of "the quality white folks" for whom her grandmother worked, Janie awakened to the possibilities of love and life at sixteen. After spending a spring afternoon watching bees pollinating a blossoming

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pear tree – the symbol of love, marriage, and procreation – Janie is seen by her grandmother allowing a boy to kiss her. This episode reminds nanny of her experience during slavery of being impregnated by her master, of her seventeen-year-old daughter's rape, impregnation and dissolution, and of her own imminent death, and reinforces her moral imperative to protect her granddaughter. Nanny is determined that before she dies Janie will marry Logan Killicks, thereby, in the narrator's words, "desecrating" Janie's pear-tree vision. Nanny assures Janie of her love and passes on to her the ancient lessons about racial, sexual, and class politics that she has learned:

"Honey, 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. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd. . . . You ain't got nobody but me. . . . Ah got tuh try and do for you befo' mah head is cold.?" (p. 16-17)

Whereas the implied author seems here to share philosophically in Nanny's ancient wisdom, she is closer emotionally and morally, as we shall see, to her protagonist's desire "'tuh utilize mahself all over'" (p. 94)

Because she was born in slavery, Nanny tells Janie, "'It wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do. . . But nothing can rom 'em of they will'" (p. 17). Nanny's dream was "'to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me'" (p. 18). In coping with slavery and unwed motherhood, she sacrificed her own dreams of economic security and moral respectability for the benefit of a daughter who "'would expound what Ah felt.'" When her daughter Leafy "'got lost offa de highway,'" however, Nanny "'save de text'" for Janie, believing that her sacrifices were not too much if Janie "'just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed'" (p. 18). After passing on the text of her dream of self-realization as a woman – of developing self-esteem, security, and status in marriage – Nanny begs Janie: "'Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate'" (p. 21). However, Janie and the implied author reject not only Nanny's dream of what a woman ought to be and do, but also – and this is a major flaw in the tradition of female friendship and shared understanding that feminist readings of the text celebrate – never really understand or share the "ancient power" of her love and sacrifice to provide a better life for her family.

Janie is more faithful to her symbolic significance as a Bodacious Woman – an individualist who audaciously rebels against social conventions and rejects family in pursuit of her romantic personal interests, dreams, and development – than to traditional poor black women who respect the sturdy bridges of kinship, male and female, that helped them to survive the pitfalls of life. Janie is alienated from both the legitimate and the spurious middle-class values of the black community. Rejecting the economic security that Nanny and most black women dream of as a cornerstone of marriage, a youthful Janie "'wants things sweet widmah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think'" (p. 24). She later confuses Joe Starks's line that she was "'made to sit on de front porch'" with her pious grandmother's dream that she "'just take a stand on high ground,'" scornfully accusing her grandmother of

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wanting her to "'Git up on uh high chair'" and to sit "'on porches like de white madam'" (p. 96). In contrast to Janie's personal feeling that lower middle-class black life is unexciting and unfulfilling, her friend Pheoby says: "maybe so, Janie. Still and all Ah'd love tuh experience is for just one year. It look lakhebentuh me from where Ah'm at'" (p. 96).

For Janie romance is more important than finance in marriage and common folk less inhibited and pretentious than middle-class people. Rebelling against the class that Tea cake calls "high muckty mucks" and Joe's his-and-hers gold-looking spittoons to remarry and go down "on the muck" with someone both poorer and younger than herself, Janie states: "'Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine'" (p. 96). Of the envious, more often ambivalent, lower middle-class community of Eatonville, where she endured, even if she did not enjoy, power and privilege for twenty years as Mrs. Mayor Starks, and to which she returns an autonomous new woman, Janie feels: "'If God don't think no mo' 'bout 'em then Ah do, they's a lost ball in de high grass'" (p. 9).

After her husband Joe Starks's death, which she symbolically helped to precipitate by attacking his male vanity in front of his peers with the power of her verbal wit ("'When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'" [p. 69]), Janie, at thirty-nine, takes stock of her life by reflecting on her mother and grandmother:

"Digging around inside of herself like that she found that she had no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all. She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. 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. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*. It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to that other kind that love to deal in scraps." (p. 89)

Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made,

"…the horizon – for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you – and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her grandmother's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mis-love was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time." (p. 76-77)

If Janie does not identify with the historic slavery and sexual exploitation of her female ancestors, can she realistically represent a tradition of female friendship, understanding, and support? Are Janie's security, respectability, and individuality determined only by her sexual ties with Joe Starks? Is the grandmother's dream for Janie to "'take a stand on high ground'" really reducing life to the pursuit of material things? Although the symbol of the horizon is a poetically effective expression of the possibilities of life, is it just, compassionate, or responsible for Janie to despise love and dreams of parents whose historical circumstances and consciousness influence them to interpret the possibilities of life within the context of traditional strategies of survival? Is it possible, in short, to cut oneself off completely from one's parents and past and fully realize one's identity as an individual? For Janie, the love of Tea Cake, idealized life of folk on the "muck," and friendship with Pheoby are the only human relationships she needs to attain and sustain personal wholeness, however problematic this may seem for some readers.

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In closing the frame of what Alice Walker, her literary daughter, calls "one of the sexiest, most 'healthily' rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature," Hurston returns to her thematic metaphors. "'Ah done ben tuh de horizon and back,'" Janie tells Pheoby, "'and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons.'" The memory of the love she shared with Tea Cake, especially in the upstairs bedroom, not only sustains her in his death but also, by the allegorical manner that she passes it on, inspires Pheoby: "'Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied widmahselfnomo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this'" (p. 158). Reinforcing the centrality of Janie's love of Tea Cake to her fulfillment as a woman, Hurston tells us in the closing lines of the narrative that Tea Cake

"…wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She 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" (p. 159).

The tragic irony here is that Janie is probably dying from Tea Cake biting her as she cradled him in her arms after shooting him. The implied author and heroine of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* therefore suggest that genuine love between a man and a woman is an exhilarating, fulfilling relationship of mutual respect, sharing, and sacrifice. Rather than exclusively female, however, the tradition that Hurston passes on through Janie is black, oral, and Southern. It was acquired by listening to and participating in the telling of "lies" by men in Florida as well as by the storytelling of her grandmother. The theme, symbolism, style, structure, and characterization of the narrative combine to impress the reader with the validity and power of this romantic folk vision of what a woman ought to be and do.

In his 1937 review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright, Hurston's contemporary and influential figure among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, claimed the novel carried "no theme, no message, and no thought". This harsh assessment has been challenged with increasing frequency and vehemence in the wake of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and the feminist movement of the 1970's. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*was praised for its celebration of the vitality and creativity of uneducated rural black people, for its honest portrayal of relations among them, and for its successful use of dialect and folklore. Hurston's presentation of Janie Crawford is affirming. At forty, Janie is satisfied with her life. She has followed her own course, rejecting security in favor of passion and adventure. She has found fulfillment in love yet has not sacrificed her independence of her self. The story she tells is inspiring to other woman. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker records a similar reaction. She has said that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "speaks to me as a novel, past or present has ever done…, there is enough self-love in that one book-love of community, culture, traditions to restore a world".

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