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Their Eyes Were Watching God

by

Zora Neale Hurston

1937



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Most of the novel's action takes place in three Florida locales: rural west Florida; Eatonville, just north of Orlando; and the bean-fields outside of Palm Beach. The frame of the story, Janie's.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Janie Crawford (Killicks, Starks, Woods) - The novel is the story of Janie's coming to self-awareness, living her life according to her own purpose. At the beginning of the novel, she decides to tell her story to her friend, Pheoby, knowing full well that the town of Eatonville will be wanting to.....

"Tea Cake" (Vergible Woods) - Janie's third husband, Tea Cake, is a free-spirit. He is in his twenties, about fifteen years younger than Janie. Tea Cake has no family and not much history. He is the.....

Joe Starks - Janie's second husband, Joe Starks, is a very hard-working, man-of-the-town; during the course of the novel, he becomes a significant founder of Eatonville. Joe has a fixed vision of

Pheoby Watson - Janie's only apparent friend in Eatonville, Pheoby is the listener to Janie's life story. Pheoby is a middle-aged woman, like Janie, and, unlike the other townspeople, she respects Janie. She.....

Minor Characters

Nanny - Janie's grandmother is a former slave who works for a white family and raises Janie. Nanny is a successful "mother" to Janie and a hard worker who manages to own her.....

Logan Killicks - Logan is Janie's first husband, an older man who has property and is considered "dependable" by Janie's grandmother. He is a hard-working farmer, bald, and

Hezekiah - When Joe Starks dies, Hezekiah is the young man who helps

CONFLICT

The point of the story is for Janie to tell Pheoby how it is she has come back to sit on her own porch, by herself, in Eatonville. Janie disappeared with Tea Cake a couple of years earlier, and has come back without him. In order for Pheoby to understand the full impact of Janie's mindset, she feels she must tell Pheoby her entire life story.

Protagonist - Janie Crawford is clearly the story's protagonist. Their Eyes is Janie's story, her

Antagonist - Janie's antagonist is her search for her true self. During the search, Janie confronts a series of characters that are less than perfect, but far from evil. Joe Starks is probably

Climax - The story reaches a climax during a terrible hurricane on "the muck," when Janie and Tea Cake must run for their lives. After deciding to ride out the storm in their

Outcome - The outcome of the hurricane is tragic, for while Tea Cake is saving Janie, he is bitten by the mad dog. Although he succeeds in saving his wife, he comes down

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

When Janie returns to Eatonville, the whole town seems to turn out to watch her walk down the street by herself and up to her own house. She had disappeared some years before, with a young man named Tea Cake. The townspeople wonder why he has not returned with her. In fact, the town is viciously curious, but only Pheoby Watson cares enough about Janie to go and visit her, bringing some dinner and lending a friendly ear. Janie decides to tell her friend Pheoby the whole story of her life.

Janie's story begins in the backyard of her grandmother's white employers, where she realizes she is darker-skinned than the white children she has always lived around. Janie has lived a conservative childhood, for she is being raised by her protective and traditional grandmother. When her grandmother sees her kissing a local boy over the garden fence, she grows worried about Janie's future and marries her off to an older neighbor, Logan Killicks, a man with property who can "protect" her. The marriage is not happy for Janie.

Her grandmother dies, and after a short time, Janie escapes from Logan. She marries Joe Starks, and they go to live at a new black settlement called Eatonville. Joe is an ambitious man. He becomes mayor of the new town, opens a store, builds a big white house, and runs the post office. He wants Janie to.....

THEMES

Major Theme - The novel is the story of a woman's search for contentment within herself; it is

Minor Themes - The novel also revolves around the theme of race relations. Janie's story

MOOD

Although filled with hardships, *Their Eyes Are Watching God* has an incredibly inspiring mood. Told from the point of view of Janie sitting very contentedly on her porch, the story tells how

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891, in Eatonville, Florida, the fifth child of a preacher and a schoolteacher. Throughout her childhood and into her thirties, she attended a variety of schools, including Howard and Barnard, where she studied anthropology. During her college years, she also published her first short stories, often in *Opportunity* magazine. By 1926, she had two published plays. She had also begun to collect folkloric material in Harlem and her home state of Florida to use in her writing. In 1926 she also

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Alice Walker is credited with beginning the Zora Neale Hurston revival. Walker's 1975 article in *Ms.* magazine, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," recounts Walker's search for Hurston's grave. Since that time *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Hurston herself have been recognized as significant contributors to American arts and letters, feminism, and African-American history and literature. The.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

While men are often disappointed by dreams that remain unrealized, women are able to turn their dreams into truths to live by, even if the truths never materialize into reality. The story begins with such a woman, who is around forty years of age. She has just returned to Eatonville from burying the dead, the sudden dead. At sundown, she arrives in the town and passes by townspeople who watch her and form judgments that are cruel. The men see her body and her swinging hair; the women look at her old shirt and overalls. They all wonder why her young husband is not with her. They all wonder if he has spent all of her money.

Janie simply walks up the street, opens her gate, and walks up the steps to her own house. The women think she is rude, not worth any trouble. Pheoby Watson is the exception. She counts herself as Janie's friend. The other women argue with Pheoby, saying Janie Stark is worthless; but she reminds them that they are not sinless themselves. Pheoby soon decides to leave the others gathered on the porch and go take Janie some dinner. The two friends greet each other warmly, and Janie gratefully eats Pheoby's mulatto rice. After eating, Janie wants to wash and soak her tired feet and sit and talk for awhile. The two of them laugh and compliment each other. They discuss how everyone in the town is dying of curiosity to find out what Janie has been up to.

Even Pheoby is eager to hear all about Janie's life and what has brought her back. Janie simply says Tea Cake is gone and that's the only reason Janie is back. Pheoby, of course, does not understand, so Janie invites her to sit right where she is and listen to her story. As darkness envelopes them, Janie begins to tell her story.

Notes

Chapters One and Twenty comprise the "frame" of the story, the portion where Janie arrives home and introduces and finishes her life story. Pheoby is the listener, a friend, and an encouraging ear. She is not like the other townsfolk, who show their pettiness. They are portrayed as distant and small-minded, eager to find an unchristian evidence of evil. They are jealous of Janie, a wealthy, middle-aged woman who has taken off with a younger man. They are also curious about Janie, for she has returned to town, dressed in poor clothes but still looking young and self-confident. Pheoby, on the other, just likes her friend and respects her independence. To show her support, she takes Janie some dinner.

Although Janie does not say much in this opening chapter, several things are obvious. Tea Cake, Janie's younger lover, is now gone, but she has enjoyed her life with him. In spite of her loss, she is an undefeated and proud woman. Her easy and friendly manner with Pheoby does not reflect a downtrodden woman, just a road-weary one, who is appreciative of a good meal and who wants to wash her tired feet. The New Testament reference to washing a traveler's feet, in this case Janie washing her own, suggests that she is both fallen and redeemed. The next eighteen chapters will chart the experiences that cause her to feel debased and then forgiven; they will show how she arrives at contented womanhood.

CHAPTERS 2- 4

Summary

Janie sees her life as a tree, with "dawn and doom in the branches." She tells how she never knew her mother and father and was raised by her grandmother, Nanny, who worked for white folks in West Florida. Janie played with the white children, not knowing she was different from them. It was not until a man took a picture of all the children together that Janie realized that she was the dark one, different than the white children. This difference became more clear when she started school and the children teased her about living in the white people's backyard. They also joked about Janie dressing in their cast-off clothes and wearing ribbons in her hair. They talked about her father's flight from the sheriff, even though they did not know the whole story. Nanny, seeing what was happening, decided that she and Janie needed a place of their own. Her white employer helped Nanny set up a house on a piece of land. Janie believes that her conscious life begins at the gate to Nanny's house.

When she was about sixteen, Janie spent one spring afternoon under the blossoming pear tree in Nanny's yard, staring up into the branches. The blooms, the new leaves, and the song of the virgin-like spring came to life all around her. As she watched the bees bury their busy heads in the blossoms, she felt the tree shiver and froth in delight, as if in sexual ecstasy. Janie herself felt a sweet, remorseless pain, which left her languid. As she rose to go, she wondered when and where she might find such ecstasy herself. Arriving at home, she finds

Nanny asleep and goes back outside. Johnny Taylor is coming up the road. When Nanny wakes, she sees Janie and Johnny Taylor out by the gate, kissing. She calls Janie inside.

Nanny, old and weary, begins to explain to Janie that she is a woman now, a shocking thought for the young girl. Nanny insists that it is time for Janie to marry and does not want her wasting her time with the likes of Johnny Taylor. Janie, however, has no desire to marry at age sixteen. She feels that Nanny's evaluation of Johnny Taylor makes her kissing him nothing but trash. Nanny means no harm. She is tired and worried about Janie's future security. She tells her granddaughter that Logan Killicks has been asking after her. Janie is horrified, for he is an old man. He bears little relation to the pear tree. When Nanny insists that Logan is a good man, Janie cannot hide her displeasure. Nanny, angry at the girl's attitude, slaps Janie. When she sees Janie's tears, she brushes her hair from her face and feels sorry.

Nanny takes Janie on her lap and tries to explain the basics of life to her. She says that the white man is the ruler of everything, and he hands his burdens to the black man. In turn, the black man hands it to his women. As a result, *black women are the mules of the world*. Nanny has been praying that it would be different for her granddaughter. She knows that she is old and wants to see Janie safe in life. She believes that Logan Killicks will make a good husband, for he will protect Janie.

Nanny was raised in slavery, "a work-ox and a brood-sow." Her daughter, Janie's mother, was the result of abuse at the hand of her white master. When he left to fight in the Civil War, his wife perceived the baby's whiteness and threatened to whip Nanny near to death. Nanny, with her week-old baby, escaped to a nearby swamp and hid until the day freedom was declared. After the war, Nanny did not marry, but came to west Florida with a white family, who helped her raise her daughter. Unfortunately, the daughter was raped by the schoolteacher and became pregnant. After Janie was born, her mother took to drinking and running around, finally leaving home forever. Nanny can only hope her daughter is at peace somewhere.

The presence of Janie in her life gave Nanny a second chance. She has always tried to do right by the girl; she does not want anybody, white or black, using Janie. She genuinely believes that Logan is the right husband for her granddaughter and arranges the marriage. Janie wonders if love will come with marriage, or if marriage ends loneliness. The wedding takes place in Nanny's parlor. There is lots of food and a celebration, but the whole affair lacks excitement. Janie tries to believe, as Nanny says, that she will come to love Logan Killicks and that she will not feel lonely, but she is uncertain.

After three months of married life, Janie, feeling glum, goes to see Nanny in the white folks' kitchen. Nanny, upbeat and happy to see her granddaughter, quickly perceives that something is wrong. She suspects that Janie is pregnant, but the girl says she is not. She wonders if the couple has fought, but Janie says no. Janie says Logan brings in the firewood and does not hit her. Nanny casually remarks that such devotion will not last long. Nanny then insists upon knowing what is wrong. Janie explains that she does not love Logan; the promised transformation in her feelings has not happened. Nanny is annoyed and exclaims that "love just makes you sweat for nothing." She explains that fancy dudes with no money are easy to find; Logan, however, offers land, money, and security. Janie says she does not want fancy dudes, but Logan's land does not satisfy her heart either. She complains that Logan is simply not meant to be loved; he is old, ugly, and not very clean. Janie cries, thinking about the beauty of the pear tree. Nanny sternly sends Janie home. She then begins to pray earnestly about Janie's problem. Nanny dies within the month.

Janie waits, hoping for better things. She knows the words of the trees and the wonders of the natural world. She addresses the falling leaves, saying that people and things have failed her. She is disappointed that marriage has not brought love. She hangs on the gate, anxiously looking up the road. She has become a woman, but there is no joy in it.

Before their first anniversary, Logan stops treating Janie nicely. He says she is spoiled and must learn to work. One day he insists that she cut seed potatoes while he goes to look about purchasing another mule. After cutting potatoes, she sits under an oak tree in the yard where she can see the road. She notices a young man walking and whistling; he is city stylish, with his hat cocked at an angle. Janie runs to the pump to make noise, hoping to gain his attention. He looks at Janie and asks for a drink of water. They strike up a conversation. His name is Joe Starks, and he comes from Georgia. He is on his way to a new Negro town being built in Florida. He has saved up some money and plans to do some important things in the new settlement. He cannot believe Janie is married and is shocked to learn that her husband wants her behind a plow. When he says she should be on a porch with a fan and with other folks doing for her, she laughs. They rest together under a tree and talk more. Joe decides to stay in the area for a week or so. Janie manages to meet him every day.

Joe's plans begin to include Janie. She is slow to respond, because she is shy, because Joe is not the pear tree either, and because the memory of Nanny is still powerful. Joe assures her that he will marry her, honor her, and treat her like a lady. If she will meet him down the road after sun-up the next day, she can leave with him and start living like she ought to live. Janie debates with herself. That night in bed she speaks to Logan, who says she acts like snobby white folks. She hints that she may run off. Although this idea scares Logan, he says that there are not many other fools like him to take care of her. She says he only counts material things. He is resentful and hopes he has hurt her feelings.

The next morning, while she cooks breakfast, Logan calls her from the barn to help him move a manure pile. She thinks he looks like a clumsy bear. She tells him that she has her own work to do. He claims that her place is wherever he says. She argues that she was not born just to take care of his sixty acres. Logan angrily tells her not to low-rate him and threatens to take an ax and kill her. He believes that she does not want him because he is hard working and honest, unlike her family. Half sobbing, he says that some "low-life nigger must have got ahold of her ear."

Janie goes inside, feeling wrong-side out. While she cooks breakfast, she thinks about Logan's words and other considerations. She decides to waste no more time. She heads out the gate, going south. Even if she does not find Joe, she knows that has made a decent change in her life. She flings away her apron and makes a bouquet of wild flowers. Joe is waiting for her with a hired rig. He buys her new clothes of silk and wool. They are then married before sundown. That night they sit on the boardinghouse steps and watch the sun disappear.

Notes

In this section, Janie estimates her young life. She judges her grandmother's existence as very different from her own. She does not discount or disregard her grandmother's history, but she does disavow any responsibility to live by it. She must make her own experiences and history. When she first meets Joe Starks, she does recall her grandmother's concerns and is temporarily influenced by them; before long, however, she finds Joe to be a man of good intent and decides to pursue him. She is rewarded for her efforts, for he carries her off in style and marries her.

The book's most significant image is the pear tree, which first appeared in Chapter 1. In this section, Janie's sexual awakening is stated in terms of the bees-and-trees imagery, and she eagerly wonders when she will feel the joy of the pear tree. It becomes the measure by which she will evaluate all of her partnerships with men. If a man falls short, such as Logan does, Janie states that he does not live up to the pear tree, which shook with pleasure in response to the bees.

In spite of the fact that the sixteen-year-old Janie follows the command of her grandmother to marry Logan,

she is determined to find her own way. She quickly realizes that her grandmother's estimation of love and marriage is bogus. Logan, who is old and demanding, is certainly not meant for her. Although he is kind to her at first, he is never a real husband. As he begins to increasingly boss her around and deride her background, she knows she cannot stay with him. She also knows that Joe is not exactly the pear tree she is seeking, but he does present an interesting far horizon for her. As a result, Janie leaves with him. Hurston does not even bother to comment on the fact that she marries Joe without divorcing Logan.

The quick history of Janie's family and the first half of Janie's life presented in these three chapters is rich with historical detail and a feminist perspective on the place of African-American women in the United States. Nanny has been a slave, who was sexually abused by her white master. Janie's mother is.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Janie Crawford (Killicks, Starks, Woods) - Janie is an attractive black woman and the protagonist of the novel. As a female looking for fulfillment, she learns to live according to her values, refusing to be defined by others. She was born an only child and abandoned by her mother. Janie was raised by Nanny, her grandmother and an ex-slave, who greatly influences her thinking. As she grows up, she is.....

Pheoby Watson - Janie's friend is the perfect listener. A resident of Eatonville, she is set aside from the other town gossips by her high regard for Janie. She is sympathetic to Janie's life and wants to hear her story, not for the satisfaction of hearing a tragedy, but because she understands that Janie has.....

Nanny Crawford - Janie's grandmother, a former slave, represents a type of thinking that is, to Janie, old fashioned and born from fear. Since Janie is raised by her grandmother, the woman is a great influence on her early thinking. Nanny tells Janie that black women are the mules of the.....

Logan Killicks - Janie's first husband lives up to his last name. He nearly kills Janie's soul as he taunts his young wife. He works hard, but he is an old man who cannot change and is in no.....

Joe Starks - Janie's second husband shows up at the moment when she needs an escape from Logan, and she becomes his prize possession. He is thoroughly self-confident and takes many situations in **hand**, steering them to what he feels is a reasonable end. He does not have much self-perception, however, and.....

"Tea Cake" (Vergible Woods) - Tea Cake is the man who knows what love is. He is not a man of wealth or power, but is a person who knows how to enjoy life and live.....

The Townspeople and the Muck Folk - Much like a Greek chorus or a singing refrain, the groups of people around Janie comment regularly on the action. Hurston's love of folklore works to

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Their Eyes Were Watching God has a very simple structure. The "frame" of the narrative, found in the first and last chapters, both introduces and closes the story of Janie Crawford's life and leaves open the possibility that her life will go on in a new variety of experiences. The problem that is solved in the story is Janie's desire and search for self-establishment, for constructing a way of life and persona that makes sense to her and fully engages her in the business of living. Pheoby takes Janie's story as a lesson, listening carefully to her friend in order to get some insight of their own.

Janie's story is straightforward. There is an introduction to her past, where the reader learns about her

mother's desertion and her being raised by Nanny. The action really begins with her vision of the pear tree, for it marks the moment of her enlightenment and maturing into womanhood. Shortly thereafter, Nanny.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Self-fulfillment is the most obvious theme in the story and is symbolized by Janie's pear tree. When she is sixteen, she watches the bee take nectar from the tree, and from that point forward she looks for the perfect male relationship that can fulfill her. Part of her search for fulfillment is sexual, for.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Compare and/or contrast the basic characters of Janie's three husbands - Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake. Why does each marriage come to an end?
2. What is the symbolic meaning of the pear tree to Janie?

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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