

**Major Works Data Sheet****Title:**           *Their Eyes Were Watching God*          **Author:**           Zora Neale Hurston          **Date of Publication:**           1937          **Genre:**           novel          **Historical information about the period of publication:**

The decade of the "roaring twenties," a pivotal and turbulent one in American history, was also a period of unprecedented flowering of Black culture, encompassing literature, the visual and plastic arts, as well as the performing arts. Harlem, an area in upper Manhattan where the Black community had been residing since the beginning of the century, became the epicenter of Black cultural life. Life a magnet, Harlem's fame also drew aspiring Black writers from all over the United States and the West Indies into its precincts. For almost two decades (1917-1935), they supplied art to the world. Many southern rural Black Americans came to Harlem in search of economic opportunity and a haven from racial oppression. They brought with them the wealth of oral tradition, regional speech patterns, and rhythms, including the blues and jazz. Black magazines *Opportunity* and *Crisis* provided the stimulus for literary competitions.

But the greatest stimulus was the extraordinary wealth of talent compressed into a small section of the big city. *Source:*  
[www.dartheherington.com/HarlemRenaissance.html](http://www.dartheherington.com/HarlemRenaissance.html)

**Biographical information about the author:**

Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida, to John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher, and Lucy Ann Potts Hurston, a former country school teacher. In 1918 she graduated from Morgan Academy and entered Howard University. Hurston's first short story was published in *Stylus*, Howard University's literary magazine. She was an active participant in the Harlem Renaissance, associating with such writers as W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay. She received a scholarship to Barnard College where she majored in anthropology. From 1927 to 1931 with the financial assistance of Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston traveled throughout the South collecting African American folklore. In 1934 her first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was published. In 1936 and 1938 Hurston received Guggenheim Fellow-ships to collect folklore. Throughout her writing career she held a variety of jobs: teaching, writing for a newspaper, and housekeeping. In 1960 Hurston died in poverty and was buried in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida. In 1973, Alice Walker had a tombstone erected on her grave. *Source:*  
[www.smeadowsishandsome.org/aZoraBorealis](http://www.smeadowsishandsome.org/aZoraBorealis)

**Characteristics of the genre:**

Fiction

**Plot Summary:**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of Janie Crawford, a black woman in Florida, as she searches for love and contentment. The novel is a frame-tale; Janie tells her friend Pheoby what has happened to her and tells Pheoby to pass the story on to others in Eatonville, Florida, where Janie is living.

Janie was raised by her grandmother Nanny after Leafy, her mother (and Nanny's daughter by her slaveowner) was raped by the schoolteacher and left town. They live with a white family, the Washburns, and help care for the family and the house. When Janie is sixteen, Nanny sees her kissing Johnny Taylor and decides that it is time for Janie to marry. She arranges it with Logan Killicks, a thirty-year-old man in town, who owns property, a mule, and an organ. A former slave, Nanny does not want Janie to live a life of poverty. Logan, however, treats Janie like a servant.

Janie meets Joe (also called Jody) one day near the house and decides to leave Logan and go with Joe. Joe and Janie marry and travel to Eatonville, a new black town, and there Joe buys land and builds the town's general store. For all his promises for the future, Joe treats Janie like a servant as well, assigning her to work in the store and not allowing her to participate in the conversations that take place on the porch. He also tells her to cover her hair so that other men will not have the chance to admire it. Joe wants Janie to behave as "the mayor's wife" and be above the daily comings and goings in the town. The marriage becomes a shell, and Janie learns to keep important feelings and thoughts inside. After twenty years of marriage, Joe dies.

A man named Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods arrives in town one day. Younger than Janie by more than ten years, Tea Cake's playful and irreverent attitude appeals to Janie. He teaches her to play checkers, fish, and shoot. She decides to leave Eatonville and go with him to the Florida Everglades where they will work on the muck, planting and picking beans. They spend two happy years there.

A hurricane passes through the Everglades, and Janie and Tea Cake try to outrun it. In trying to protect Janie during their escape, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and develops rabies. The illness makes him mean and irrational. He tries to shoot her, and she kills him in self-defense. She is tried for murder and acquitted. She decides to return to Eatonville and tell her story to Pheoby. She does.

Memorable Quotation	Significance
<p>"She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels" (72).</p>	<p>This quotation (from the narrator) explains Janie's nature in her first marriage. She is symbolized as, literally, being in a rut.</p>
<p>"To my thinkin' mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer'n grief" (89).</p>	<p>Here, Janie reflects on her lack of sadness about the death of Mr. Starks, who was her dead husband, but not someone she mourned. She stops acting sad because she does not feel it.</p>
<p>"Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122).</p>	<p>This explanation of Janie's feelings for Tea Cake show that she is willing to risk herself for him – growth for her and a new sensation to her (that she can feel such utter devotion).</p>
<p>"They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (151).</p>	<p>This quotation explains the title of the book. While the quotation itself is from the hurricane (when Janie and Tea Cake and the others are watching it blow), it also reflects the theme of the book – individuals are more than just people staring into the dark. When they find love and are truly themselves, they can see God.</p>
<p>"Love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore" (182).</p>	<p>Here, Janie explains what she thinks love is. She thinks it is unique each time it is felt.</p>
<p>"It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there..Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (183).</p>	<p>In this quotation, Janie explains the steps individuals must take to become self-actualized – to find God and to live life a bit and get some experience as individuals.</p>
<p>"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" (184).</p>	<p>The final quotation shows Janie at peace. She "calls in her soul" to come and reflect on her life, full like a net, as she begins her new life after Tea Cake. We know as readers that she will be okay.</p>

## Characters

Name	Role in the story	Significance	Adjectives
Janie Mae Crawford Killicks Starks Woods	the protagonist--this novel is the story of her life and her loves; the storyteller of her life;	She proves that goals are obtainable, if you put your mind to achieving that goal; Janie teaches us that one cannot be controlled by others; one must control their own actions and be free of restriction by others to be happy. She teaches us that life is a struggle and one must learn from it all. She is significant because she represents only herself: she cannot be a symbol for every black woman.	independent, self-confident, aggressive, extrovert, proud, hard working, admirable, dejected, strong, wise, unique, insatiable,
Phoebe Wilson	Janie's friend and confidante in Eatonville	lets the reader gain Janie's perspective and fears about her decision-making process; she cautions and warns Janie; she demonstrates society's idealized woman--caring obediently for her family--	friendly, open-minded
Nanny Crawford	Janie's grandmother who raises Janie.	She unwittingly spoils Janie's hopes for happiness when she arranges her marriage to Logan	caring, strong-willed, battered
Johnny Taylor	kissed young Janie over the fence	Janie's first feelings of lust; Nanny's cue that it is time for Janie to marry; serves as a catalyst for Janie's emerging sexuality	"shiftless"; youth; innocence (experienced?)
Logan Killicks	Janie's first husband; rich; unattractive	helps Janie discern luxury from longing	overbearing, unattractive, loving
Leafy	Janie's mother who abandoned Janie when Janie was young. She was raped by the schoolteacher.	Leafy's story made Janie take advantage of life, and not throw it away on alcohol and men. Represents what Nanny is trying to save Janie from and what Janie strives to avoid.	depressed, abused, lonely, unfortunate, naive, used
Joe Starks	Janie's second husband whose aspirations are inspirational enough to Janie for her to leave her first husband; becomes the mayor of Eatonville, the town he helped to build	Makes Janie sensitive to the trickery of her own mind; restricts Janie's physical and mental beauty by reasons of jealousy and "duty"; leaves Janie yearning for unfettered, true experience; a false prophet of true love;	dreaming, unfulfilled, scared
Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods	last and most beloved of Janie's husbands	By loving and being loved by Tea Cake, Janie learns what happiness is; and by his death she learns tortuous pain, yet eventual triumph. Janie's soul mate. The one society disapproves, but the one with whom she finds happiness.	wanderer, loving, innocent, warm, understanding, mesmerizing
Nunkie	a flirtatious friend of Tea Cake's in the Everglades	helps Janie realize her discovery that she has found love through her jealousy, and that through her love she has found that she is fulfilled	flirtatious, scheming
Mrs. Turner	A lady that befriends Janie in the muck; wants Janie to meet her brother. She owns a restaurant on the flat; source of conflict; foil to Janie and Tea Cake	Represents racial prejudice within a race. She favors light-skinned blacks. An example of what happens to a person's mindset when one's race is held to be inferior to another.	proud, rude, misled, white acting.

Setting	Symbols
<p>The novel starts with Janie's return to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death. Eatonville is significant because it is an all-black town that Janie's second husband Joe Starks was the mayor of before his death. In flash back, the novel tells about Janie's childhood in West Florida, where she grew up with white children on the Washburn's plantation. Then Janie and her grandma moved to their own house. After Janie's first marriage to Logan Killicks, she moved to his sixty-acre farm. Janie wasn't happy despite her security, so she left Logan for Joe Starks, her second husband. Janie and Joe traveled from West Florida to Eatonville, an all-black town where Joe was elected mayor, and Janie had to work in the general store that Joe owned. After Joe's death, Janie left Eatonville with Tea Cake Woods, and they were married in Jacksonville, Florida where he had a job with a railroad shop. They traveled together down to the Florida Everglades, "down on the muck" until a hurricane drove them to Palm Beach temporarily. They went back to the Everglades after the storm had passed, and after Tea Cake's death from rabies, Janie returned alone to Eatonville to live in the house she had shared with Joe Starks.</p>	<p><u>Janie's hair</u> - Janie's expression of freedom; when her hair was down, she was free, beautiful, and relaxed; but when Joe makes her wear it up, it is a symbol of her imprisonment and oppression; her youth and her hidden sensuality</p> <p><u>pear tree blossom</u> - symbolizes Janie's life and her hope and fertility, freshness, oneness with nature; the pollination represents the sensual "marriage" which confuses Janie; becomes Janie's tree of knowledge; Janie's blossoming womanhood and fertility</p> <p><u>streetlight</u> - Joe's belief that every problem has a simple fix</p> <p><u>garden seed</u> that Tea Cake leaves behind is the only thing that Janie saves. The seeds represent the future of Janie and Tea Cake's love.</p> <p><u>lamp post</u> - Biblical allusion to "let there be light"; and Joe's desire to have control and a high standing amongst the townspeople</p> <p><u>Matt Bonner's mule</u> - Nanny suggest that the Black woman is the mule of the world; Matt uses it as a beast of burden as Logan had used Janie. Joe buys the mule simply so he may look good in the eyes of his community and so that he may possess it. He did the same with Janie when he married her.</p> <p><u>vultures</u> - symbolize the inhabitants of Eatonville who take apart Janie in a figurative since the same way the vultures literally take apart the mule.</p>
Significance of opening scene	Significance of ending/closing scene
<p>The opening chapter emphasizes the differences between the "porch-sitters" of Eatonville, who just sit and talk without accomplishing anything and Janie, who has lived her life to the full. These sitters watched Janie from a distance and judged her. They cruelly cut her down behind her back. In sharp contrast, Janie speaks pleasantly and without malice. She does not stop to waste time on the porch, but goes to her own house. When Pheoby speaks to Janie, they laugh pleasantly without the undercurrent of malice present with the "sitters." From the opening chapter the reader learns that Janie, during her mysterious journey, has gained the composure, humility, and knowledge that the sitters still lack. This sparks our interest to know what she has learned.</p>	<p>The novel is a narrative of one woman's self-actualizing journey, and the struggles she endured forging (consciously and subconsciously) this pilgrimage. Thus it serves best for the ending to circle back to the beginning, to the point where all conflicts are solved, and healing can begin. As Janie closes her conversation with Phoeby, and the reader, we all come to terms with Janie's pain and her triumph. The three words "Here was peace," sums up the entire journey, adding a warm, sincere finality to the novel. Janie finishes telling Phoeby her journey and washes her feet--signifying the end of a journey after learning a great deal. As she ascends the stairs the lamp she holds is her own internal light that shines because she is free from the things that have oppressed her all her life. After concluding her story, her loyal friend Phoeby is encouraged and we see the stark contrast between what Janie used to be (Phoeby) and Janie after her life of many experiences and the discovery of freedom.</p>
Themes	
<p>Love is blind to such carnal qualities as age, social standings, and economic stature.                      Uncovering disillusion in life provides means for growing and understanding love and one's self.                      Knowledge of life cannot be taught; it must be learned first hand through experience.                      Individuals must discover who they are for themselves.                      Society will inevitably try to mold individual clones, but the truest and most complete life is the one that leads to self-actualization.                      Love is not necessarily acquired through marriage. Love is a pure and honest feeling that comes with trust and equality.                      One can persevere and gain a true sense of self if one uses his past failures to plan for a more positive future.</p>	