

**A Journey and Celebration of Selfhood
in Zora Neale Hurston's Book "Their
Eyes Were Watching God"**

Review By Jacques Fleury

"Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, 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 the 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."

So begins Zora Neale Hurston's epic story about an emotional and spiritual journey of self-discovery. Through my incessant study of literature and the craft of writing, I have learned that what grabs a reader right from the onset of a story is by having a fully formed voice and vision that prepares us to go along for the ride; that we will be transported elsewhere to another reality.

In honor of Black History Month, the historical inauguration of America's first Black President and Valentine's Day, I've decided to offer a dichotomous exploration of variant thematic ideologies of love and Black literary contributions to American culture and "Their Eyes Were Watching God" allows me to do just that.

"A graduate of Barnard... Zora Neale Hurston published seven books—four novels, two books of folklore, and an autobiography—more than fifty shorter works between the middle of the Harlem Renaissance and the end of the Korean War, when she was the dominant Black woman writer in the United States. The dark obscurity in which her career then lapsed reflects her staunchly independent political stances rather than any deficiency of craft and vision," writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the afterward to *Their Eyes*.

Hurston, whose life spanned between the years 1891 and 1960, was a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist. Her fictional and factual writings of Black Heritage remain second to none. "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is Hurston's most highly praised novel and is considered a classic among the best of Black literature.

Their Eyes recounts the story of Janie Crawford's burgeoning selfhood through three marriages with loving empathy and stinging urgency. Janie, who is described as "fair-skinned, long haired and dreamy as a child" advances in years to anticipate better treatment than she actually receives;



Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

that is until she has an unexpected encounter with an amusing, smooth- and fast-talking younger man and “roustabout” named Tea Cake, who entices her into an emotional and spiritual journey that will change her life forever. He offers her an opportunity to see herself and life through his eyes without being regrettably adorned with the formerly disparaging labels of being “one man’s mule” or another man’s wallflower through her previous two marriages.

Over the course of the story, the character of Janie unfolds, as she will learn that she does not have to succumb to living a life ripe with rife, acrimony or maladroit romantic dreams. Towards the end of the story, both Janie and the reader will learn “two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh themselves,” since her character struggles with the incessant panoptic surveillance and potentially spirit crushing criticism of her neighbors.

Every good writer or storyteller has to have motifs and Hurston’s *Their Eyes* is swimming in a crystal clear blue- eyed sea of symbolism. In *Their Eyes* she uses an overworked, underfed and tormented mule to illustrate the dire living conditions of her main character Janie, what she endures on her way to spiritual, emotional, and physical freedom and awakening. Her depiction of Janie’s life of strife serves not only to demonstrate essentially the mistreatment of Janie as “one man’s mule and another man’s adornment”, but it also attests to the meager living conditions of women, that is to say in terms of oppression and maltreatment, during her time period. Since she died right at the cusp of both the Civil Rights and the Women’s Equal Rights Movements, Hurston’s *Their Eyes* would go on to achieve greater respect and acknowledgement as an indispensable part of Black literature that would remain unparalleled by any other posthumously.

Also in Hurston’s novel, I was particularly enthralled by her use of Black vernacular speech (i.e. go tuh God...livin’ fuh theyselves...) to chronicle her Black female characters’ coming to the best of their being or emerging consciousness. In his afterward, Henry Louis Gates offers a keen observation of some of the most indispensable key elements regarding the deceptively simple trajectory of Hurston’s story. He writes that “The Charting of Janie Crawford’s fulfillment as an autonomous imagination, *Their Eyes* is a lyrical novel that correlates the needs of her first two husbands for ownership of progressively larger physical space (and the gaudy accoutrements of upward mobility) with the suppression of self-awareness in their wife. Only with her third and last lover, a roustabout called Tea Cake whose unstructured frolics center around and about the Florida swamps, does Janie at last blooms...”

In other words, towards the end of the story, Janie did not find love and happiness as presumably defined by her first two husbands by the often superficial veneers of status and ownership of fancy property, ironically she found the bond of love, God and community living by a swamp with a mere unrefined and uneducated vagrant whose only means of sustaining Janie was through a daily dosage of love, laughter and whatever he could muster with his bare hands to put food on the table.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

Therefore, in honor of Black History Month, black history in America and for the sake of posterity, you will find that in “Their Eyes Were Watching God” concurrent themes of hope, resilience, love and an appreciation of Black Heritage are enough to make you want to put *Their Eyes* on your to read list this February and hopefully beyond the bounds of one month.

[Previously published in Fleury’s book: “*Chain Letter To America: The One Thing You Can Do To End Racism*”]