

# *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (Published in 1937)

## Approved for use in English III

### Summary of the Work:

Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a classic piece of literature about an African-American heroine, Janie, and her search for self-discovery/development. Fair-skinned and longhaired Janie grows up expecting more from life. Throughout her journey she finds three distinctly different types of love. Janie narrates her story as a memory to her friend Pheoby, on her own porch, 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. Janie depicts her relationships and marriages between Janie and Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Woods, better known as "Tea Cake." True love is finally obtained with Tea Cake; the story reaches a climax during a terrible hurricane on "the muck," when Janie and Tea Cake must run for their lives. In spite of the tragic circumstances surrounding the hurricane and Tea Cake's death, the novel has a comic ending, for Janie is found innocent of murder and given a chance to reorder her life and come to grips with who she really is. In telling her story, it is obvious that she feels like a fulfilled woman who has known love and has precious memories to surround her. She is content in knowing that her pear tree has blossomed.

### Rationale:

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an ideal selection for the junior curriculum because it steps out of the typical male character role and explores the heroic qualities of a female main character. The novel also revolves around the theme of race relations. Janie's story really begins when she realizes that she has dark skin. It had never been an issue in her early childhood. Once she is aware of her difference, however, she begins to notice how differently black people are treated.

In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the author Zora Neale Hurston is interested in women's role in society and male-female relationships. Hurston's depiction of the differences that exist between the male and female gender is extraordinary. She is able to incorporate the folk language and descriptive metaphoric language in order to paint the most vivid and intricate picture of her characters and their surroundings.

### Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

- Wilson's Fiction 04/01/01
- Wilson's Senior High School 11/01/02
- "The hierarchy itself": Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the sacrifice of narrative authority. (Critical Essay) African American Review Jun 22, 2002

\* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

\* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

### Noted Distinction:

#### Readability:

- Lexile Score: 1080
- Readability Level: 7.9

#### Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

#### Standard Alignment: ([link](#))

#### Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

### Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

Mature - young adult literature, Hurston tackles the African American southern dialect and includes the use of the racial "n" word. Hurston also takes on the topics of physical (rape) and emotional abuse, interracial relationships and arranged marriages. Besides addressing the enormous range of experiences of African-American women – specifically gender differences and race relations – Hurston shows her love of anthropology in the novel. The stories reflect the values, social structures, and love of language of the people.

### Connection to the Curriculum:

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was probably too radical for 1937. Not popular at the time of publication the novel was rediscovered in the 1960s. The protagonist was a black female with the ability to effectively critique patriarchy and take her self-reflective time to make her own distinctions on how to exist in society.

Hurston's work depicts the time and mannerisms of black culture in the south, during the depression, in regional style. The connection of the story and author's life plays well to the significance of the Harlem Renaissance.

The novel show cases the multiple levels of Metaphoric style – metaphor and extended-metaphors; also using the literary elements of simile and personification.

### Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)