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## Complexity Of Marriage And Gender Roles In Their Eyes Were Watching God By Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of Janie Crawford, with Janie ultimately serving as her own narrators. Her story begins with a flashback to her life as a young girl and traces her path through three different marriages. Throughout the various pages, the book is perhaps most salient in Janie's reflections on marriage in terms of how it deviates from her own expectations. The resultant tale serves as somewhat of a path through which Janie attempts to attain her vision of an ideal marriage while simultaneously developing as an independent woman. Her three husbands—Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods—each provide important lessons for Janie as she moves through the course of her life. Ultimately, Hurston's novel serves as an illustrative inquiry of the complex relationship between marriage and gender roles within society, showing the various issues that women must navigate when attempting to define their singular identities while also pursuing a joint relationship.

In order to properly understand the context of this story, it is important to examine Janie's three marriages separately—and chronologically. She is initially married at a rather young age. Despite being uninterested in marriage, she agrees due to the desire to please her Nanny, who views marriage not in the context of love but rather in the context of stability. Nanny believes that marriage is essential for Janie's economic and physical safety. Thus, Nanny's views can be seen as largely steeped in traditional gender roles where a woman submits to a man's protection, viewing marriage as a necessity for survival rather than a relationship that prioritizes aspects such as love or romanticism.

This is distinctly at conflict with Janie's personal view of marriage, which is represented by the metaphor of the pear tree. This is a reoccurring symbol throughout the work. According to Janie, "Ah want things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Hurston 23). Here, Janie can be seen romanticizing the notion of marriage, focusing on things like love, kindness, and caring, which are typically viewed as contemporary purposes of marriage. She views the interworking of the pear tree with the pollination of the bees as symbolic of the natural state of marriage. For Janie, marriage should be a state of mutual care and compassion for one another. Thus, Janie and Nanny both view marriage as important; however, Nanny views it in more transactional terms while Janie views it in more transformational terms.

Janie is quickly dismayed in her relationship with Logan as she comes to the realization that his view of marriage is not that of the pear tree but rather that of a protectionary contract aligned with the view of her Nanny. Logan sees Janie as another set of hands to help out on the farm, constantly pushing her to work harder and do more. He treats her not as a wife but rather as an employee, pushing her and acting condescendingly towards her. This relationship can be constructed as severely one-sided, restricting Janie to a life somewhat reminiscent of the life of slavery into which Nanny was born. Thus, this relationship constructs marriage as a patriarchy which nearly completely diminishes the rights of Janie as an individual. Within this arrangement, she is defined solely as a wife and has virtually no independent identity, succumbing to a gender role thrust upon her. This is much in line with what Seguin noted as "characters that are sometimes undercut by ambivalent and troubling depictions of gender submissiveness" (230).

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Janie's relationship with Logan is perhaps the least complex of her three marriages. After understandably fleeing this situation, she becomes married to Joe Starks. Together, they live in the town of Eatonville, Florida, where Joe becomes a successful businessman and mayor. Janie's relationship with Joe is much more complex than was her relationship with Logan; however, many similar themes reoccur. She is once again viewed largely as property other than a person. To Joe, her primary identity is that of his wife. While Logan viewed the marital relationship as a provision of labor, Joe views it as a provision of status. He sees Janie much as something to be showed off to others. This is exhibited in Joe's remarks, "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin' ... Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurstun, 40-41). While this represents a distinct focus, it still can ultimately be considered that of possession.

In fact, one might even be pressed to make the argument that the marital relationship with Joe reduces Janie to a more restrictive gender role than did the one with Logan. With Logan, Janie is seen as having value in terms of her ability to do things; however, with Joe, her value is seen almost exclusively in her looks and the status that having a wife confers. This is noted in the thinking that women are much like children and livestock in that someone must think for them because "they sho don't think none theirselves" (Hurstun 67). In fact, the primary reason through which Janie's relationship with Joe is more positive than that of Logan is due to the fact that she has learned to advocate her herself and embraced a greater sense of independence in spite of Joe's attempt to prescribe her to a certain gender role. However, her efforts to partake in social conversations and counter Joe's controlling nature results in her falling victim to increasing domestic violence, another method for exerting control and maintaining a traditional gender role in the marriage.

After the death of Joe, Janie suddenly finds herself empowered. However, this is not the result of a recognition of her own talents and abilities by society but rather as the result of her inheritance of Joe's estate. She recognizes this and ultimately turns down a bevy of suitors with the realization that they are not truly interested in her character but rather her possessions. Once again, the concept of marriage is portrayed in terms of possessions and contracts rather than the pear tree allegory of love that Janie desires. Janie's recognition of this illustrates that she has further grown into her own independence and created a gender role in which she is more empowered, resisting how others want to proscribe her.

It is her third marriage, to Tea Cake Woods, that is perhaps most ripe for examination and analysis. In this marriage, Janie ultimately falls in love and believes that she has finally attained her idealized marriage. She and Tea Cake leave Eatonville and travel to Jacksonville. Here, she notes that "I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl" (Hurstun 152). While this is descriptive of moving from a small town where she was an important person to a large city, it is also potentially a metaphor for losing part of her identity once again through entering marriage, a concept noted by Burrows in his analysis where he attributes marriage to "loss of personal identity" (438).

The reader will realize that Janie and Tea Cake's relationship is fraught with many of the ups and downs of typical relationships; however, it is a much more level relationship than others. There is no doubt that this marriage allows for Janie to keep her own identity to a much greater extent than the others. However, the reality of gender roles does prove to continue to be noted in some ways. Specifically, jealousy becomes a frequent aspect of the marriage, ultimately turning into domestic violence. At one point, "he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior

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justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (Hurst 140). Thus, even Tea Cake, who largely treated Janie as an equal, ultimately needed to feel as if she was something that only he possessed rather than an individual. This further cements the juxtaposition of gender roles and marriage in the work. While Tea Cake avoids the views of past husbands, he ultimately allows his jealous views to cloud his judgment and treat Janie as property in order to calm his inner misgivings. While it does seem that he truly loves Janie, as evidenced by many things such as risking his life to save her during the hurricane, even he is not above subjecting her to an inferior gender role.

Despite the problems within Janie's relationship with Tea Cake, she looks back upon it primarily fondly, thinking that she did attain the pear tree vision of marriage. According to Bealer, "Though Janie does not criticize Tea Cake's unwarranted mistrust, and consciously constructs a fantasy of her dead husband that excises the abuse and retains only the love, *Their Eyes* insists upon including such flaws in Tea Cake in order to simultaneously endorse love's liberatory power while also implying that even a great and selfless love does not guarantee permanent liberation from social hierarchies" (312). In other words, even in Janie's most satisfying moment of love, she is still not free from the oppressive aspects of marriage, forcing her to navigate the aspects of the institution of marriage that serve to oppress women.

Throughout the course of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist grows into an independent woman that eschews the gender roles that are enforced upon her throughout her life. However, the course of her journey serves as an interesting discourse on gender roles, particularly in the nature of the marital relationship. Janie experiences three vastly different marriages, all of which result in her being viewed—either wholly or partly—as property rather than person. This serves as commentary on the often problematic nature of the marital relationship for women, who must strive to balance the desire for the pear tree-like relationship envisioned in the novel with an institution that historically infringes upon their individuality and is rooted in themes of possession.