

African American Spirituality: Icons of a Nation in Selected Novels by Zora Neale Hurston

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Abstract:

In our article we examine the deep connection between African American literature and spirituality, demonstrating how faith, folklore, and tradition have profoundly shaped both identity and cultural resilience. Beginning with slave narratives and spirituals, where the story of Moses and the Israelites inspired hope for freedom, we trace how African American writers used religion and folklore as tools of resistance and self-expression. Being both a novelist and an anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston's novels are rich in cultural observation. Hurston's unique perspective, shaped by her upbringing and encounters with influential figures, set her apart from her contemporaries. Despite facing criticism for omitting overtly political themes, her work authentically captured the experiences of blacks in the South, providing a nuanced exploration of African American folklore and showcasing the complex nature of her literary legacy. The deliberate emphasis on Hurston's contributions deepens our understanding of African American spirituality, culture, and resilience within the broader societal context.

Keywords: African-American literature, spirituality, religion, folklore, anthropology, myths

Introduction

The richness and originality of African American literature have long fascinated both readers and scholars. This body of work – spanning fiction, poetry, and drama – draws on traditions and spiritual practices carried from Africa through the brutal triangular slave trade and transformed by the lived experiences of bondage, struggle, and emancipation. Spirituality, in particular, is central to understanding both the uniqueness and the universality of this essential strand of American literature. The first keyword in the title of our article is “spirituality”, a theme we trace through the works of key African American writers. This field is vast, ranging from the Negro spirituals that W.E.B. Du Bois memorably called “sorrow songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), to the poetry of Langston Hughes and the novels of Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. More than a subject for

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historians, sociologists, or literary critics, African American spirituality has been decisive in shaping American cultural identity itself.

Our article explores the intimate relationship between African-American writing and spirituality as a lasting manifestation of humanity. We searched for the roots of spirituality in the collective memory of the former slaves in North America who acquainted with the essential aspects of Christianity. Particularly moving and enlightening is the account of Gronniosaw, an African prince. During the Middle Passage, he watched the ship's captain open the Bible and read to the crew. Intrigued, Gronniosaw noticed where the Holy Bible was kept and opened it. To his disappointment, the book refused to speak to him. He felt a trace of sadness, thinking: "everyone and everything despised me because I was black" (2012: 19). Then the narrative shifts, highlighting the resistance of Africans taken into slavery, as, despite these oppressive circumstances, they learned to read and write in defiance of the rules, finding solace and unity as the books began to speak to them.

Over the years, Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous speech "I Have a Dream", reformulated the same hope for dignity and human rights: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (1963).

The second keyword in the title of our thesis is "icon", a term that we have used according to the definition given by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: "a person or thing widely admired, especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere", in this case literature, even though an African American, if questioned, would provide different answers, including movie actors, singers, baseball, and football players. Spirituality shaped the icons of the nation, literary or otherwise. Throughout the works we looked at, we see the characters' clear search for identity, as well as the spiritual, religious, and folkloric elements that make them unique and memorable. Whether we read slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) or Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), or novels with strong spiritual themes like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or James Baldwin's *Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), or look for African roots in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) – to name just a few – we can see a shared thread. These works have earned a lasting place in mainstream literature, showcasing an African American literary expression of the hopes and struggles of people marginalized by the white majority.

Riding the Damnation Train

Three decades after her death, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become a recognized classic in modern American literature, and Hurston's folklore collection *Mules and Men* is seen as a key text for African American cultural and literary studies. Ernest Hemingway wrote

a careful biography that reconstructs Zora Neale Hurston's fascinating life. Many monographs, essays, articles, and bibliographies have been written about her and her work. More importantly, her influence on African American literature continues to grow. Novelists, poets, and playwrights – including Michel Harper, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Ntozake Shange, George Wolfe, and Alice Walker – all refer to, reinterpret, and adapt Hurston's works.

Set in Alabama and Eatonville, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) shows, as Darwin Turner notes, "Miss Hurston revealed the same talents in her novels. The narrated tales, the credible, likable characters, and the colorful dialogue evoke tenderness and amusement. However, in the greater length of the novels, she showed weaknesses. She caricatured less important figures, exaggerated the language, and sacrificed structure for the sake of folktales" (Turner, 1971: 100).

Her identification with folk values, sensitivity to language nuances, and active imagination contribute to the narrative's vibrant impressions and dramatic appeal, distorting its characters, structure, and atmosphere. Using her father as a model for the anti-heroic protagonist and the Bible to give symbolic meaning to the plot, Hurston subordinates the story and character to the presentation of black folklore.

The narrative is divided into three unevenly stretched parts. The first part (chapters 1-16) traces the evolution of John Buddy Pearson from a life of poverty as an illiterate laborer to success as a deceitful preacher and trader-politician, with the help of his first wife. The second part (chapters 17-23) follows his fall from grace, orchestrated by his second wife (vengeful and practicing witchcraft) and an envious friend, while the third part (chapters 24-25) focuses on his redemption by a third (wealthy) wife and his death in a car accident after proving to be an incorrigible womanizer.

The biblical parable from the novel's title (Jonah 4:1-11) – an allusion to God as both creator and destroyer – emphasizes His mercy for the sinners of Nineveh. At the same time, the narrative highlights the judgment of Reverend Pearson for the wickedness he displayed. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson (16 April 1934), Hurston stated that her intention was for the protagonist to represent "the common run of us who love magnificence, beauty, poetry, and color so much that there can never be too much of it. Who does not feel that the ridiculous has been achieved when someone decorates a decoration?" However, John was to represent more than that: "I see a preacher as a man outside of his pulpit, and so far as I am concerned, he should be free to follow his bent as other men. He becomes the voice of the spirit when he ascends the rostrum" (Hurston, in Kaplan, 2003: 298). However, the novel fails to thoroughly analyze why this highly talented preacher-poet repeatedly violates the dictates of the spirit and misinterprets his metaphors. Lucy, John's wife, also fails to

achieve an identity between word and deed, even though she possesses the insight that is lacking in her husband. At one point, Lucy warns her daughter: “Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self. Do, you’ll be dying befo’ yo’ time is out” (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, p. 130). Loving John too much, Lucy accepts her own demise. At the moment of death, she is on the verge of self-discovery.

The critical reception of the novel, even more than half a century after its publication, is truly astonishing. Karla Holloway (1993) notes that, through the title, the novel foreshadows its tragedy. Whose “vine”? John Pearson, as a mulatto, is not necessarily the “tragic, colored” character in this novel, but he is condemned through his association with the clinging plant and the empty fruit. John Pearson finds a conducive ground for his words: “O Lawd, heah’tis once mo’ and again yo’ weak and humble servant is knee-bent and body bowed – Mah heart beneath mah knees and mah knees in some lonesome valley cryin’ fuh mercy whilst mercy kinst be found” (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, p. 25). Although most of the novel is autobiographical, it presents other essential aspects. One is the examination of intra-community relationships in a predominantly black setting. White people only appear on the periphery. Hurston extols the values and culture of Black America, including language, religion, and social relationships, in Eatonville, her predominantly Black hometown, and its surroundings. John Pearson, perhaps the most accomplished portrayal of a black preacher in African American literature, is presented as an energetic preacher, a chosen one of God. However, the human dimension is not lacking; it is that of a man subject to the same impulses, weaknesses, and mistakes as ordinary people. The novel revolves around this tension between divine and human qualities.

John Pearson is akin to the biblical Jonah, who tried to escape from God and his responsibilities. At the novel’s beginning, John compromises by doing things that are more necessary than right, assuming an escape from problems and responsibility. John never learns to accept responsibility for his actions, and this non-acceptance leads to even more incredible difficulty in bearing the consequences.

A predominant feature of the novel is the presentation of the lives of the black people whom the author loved, knew, and appreciated so much. Zora Neale Hurston is not overly concerned with the relationship between blacks and whites in Eatonville, but rather with the dynamics of this African American community and how interpersonal relationships function within this group. The novel’s central metaphor is found in the famous “Sermon” by Lovelace, recorded by Hurston in 1929 and later published, ultimately included in her first novel. For better understanding, here is an excerpt from this sermon, where we find the metaphor of the “damnation train”:

I heard de whistle of de damnation train / Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden
loaded wid cargo goin to hell / Ran at break-neck speed all de way thru de law /
All de way thru de prophetic age / All de way thru de reign of kinds and
judges— / Plowed her way thru de Jordan / And on her way to Calvary when
she blew for de switch / Jesus stood out on her track like a rough-backed
mountain / And she threw her cow-catcher in His side and His blood ditched de
train, / He died for our sins.../That's where I got off this damnation train...
(*Jonah's Gourd Vine*: 180-181)

Eric Sundquist, analyzing Zora Neale Hurston's novels in close correlation with her work as a folklorist and an anthropologist, makes the following statement about the character John Pearson:

Despite his bardic cultural function, John's redemptive role is robbed of its mythic significance by the narrative life in which his sermon is inscribed. The elaborate trope of the 'damnation train,' whose cow-catcher pierces Jesus' side and releases his sacrificial blood in the Lovelace sermon, is reduced to a burlesque figure in the train that smashes into John's Cadillac after his last act of infidelity (in Gates and Appiah, 1993: 56).

The wide resonance of the train metaphor as an image of salvation for black people (in spirituals), its association with the movement and migration of black people, the symbolism (in work songs and blues) of the endless toil of black America – all these associations that Hurston invokes throughout the novel before concentrating them in the image of the judgment day train from the sermon – are diminished into the somewhat comic instrument of punishment.

In writing about preachers, Hurston also reflects on her own father, questioning his morality and the special authority given to male ministers in African American communities. She takes the familiar image of the preacher and brings it down to a human level, even if that risks seeming bold. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is unusual in the way it deals with class conflict and the pull between religion and everyday life within a lively folk culture. However, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), widely seen as her greatest novel, stands as the true masterpiece of that culture. As both a novelist and a trained anthropologist, Hurston studied folklore with a scientific eye, but also with an artistic commitment. For Hurston, what mattered most was cultural truth and lived experience, not strict factual accuracy. That is why the line between the natural and the supernatural is so important in her work, where magical realism and folklore meet. Over the last twenty years, Hurston has become a significant subject of study, though some critics are suspicious of this renewed attention, as if people are rushing to make her an icon. After her death, she was embraced as a symbol of the civil rights and feminist movements, and today she is seen as one of the most important American writers of the 20th century, even surpassing many of her male peers.

The central role of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reflects a literary approach to multiculturalism that sometimes overlooks history, class, and the perspectives of marginalized groups, instead favoring a more mythical or universal reading. Still, Hurston's novel includes real events and characters that must be acknowledged when recognizing her skill as an artist and thinker. The importance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes from how it sets the protagonist's personal experiences against the historical context of post-Reconstruction Florida.

The novel's dramatic tension comes from the protagonist's attempts to follow her dreams as a country woman, with her light-skinned appearance, while dealing with the rules of a small, male-dominated bourgeois society that limits her chance for love and fulfillment. This tension continues until she meets Vergible Woods, known as "Tea Cake".

The protagonist's story, Janie, is the author's confession to her proud and self-aware black people, especially black women who achieve self-awareness through their own will. Written in just seven weeks while in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the novel is partly the result of what Zora discovered while collecting folklore – "a peace I have not known anywhere else on earth". This inner peace allowed her to discern the meaning of African-American life as it unfolded in Eatonville.

The novel represents a culmination of her knowledge about people, her belief in folklore and rural life, and her convictions regarding women's rights to identity and self-definition. It expresses emancipation from the constraints of African-American rural life, even as it celebrates such a life. In Haiti, where the author herself confronted the end of a romantic relationship (meaning personal liberation and reconciliation of artistic career with personal emotions), through the evolution and maturity of the protagonist, she succeeded in revealing the multiple layers of oppression operating on women of color: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world".

María Eugenia Coterá thinks that "Janie's life history... contextualizes her individual experiences as a multi-raced, heterosexual, middle-class (and later working-class) woman against the historical backdrop of post-Reconstruction Florida, a place of particular race, caste, class, and gender relations" (Coterá, 2008: 179). Janie Crawford realizes that in a world where only men have the right to sit on the porch and tell stories (about the exploited mule exhausted by the master). Wives are considered part of the property; male domination exists and operates in such a world. Janie goes through three consecutive marriages, but in this process, she gains the freedom to speak, express her feminine self, be independent of servitude, and accept her own life. Janie asserts herself because she possesses the courage and verbal skills to position herself differently from a relationship of dependence.

The protagonist's strength lies in recognizing the power of language and the ability to speak on her behalf. By writing this story of a heroine learning to love herself, Zora Neale Hurston balances the value and cost of full womanhood in a society ready to oppress based on race and gender, introducing a discourse on autonomy, possibilities, and feminine power.

On Men, Women, and Creation

The first sentences of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, written during the era of racial segregation, highlight the differentiated relationship between men and women and the creation of great myths. The novel repeatedly employs metaphors related to the horizon, conveying profound symbolic meaning:

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 out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by time. That is the life of men (*Their Eyes*: 1).

The men sail on who knows what sea, and the women, more pragmatically, return to the land to honor the funeral rites. Like a prophecy, one of these women stands out. As we approach it, we discover a magnificent creature, the object of all desires, disturbing, whose presence opens the voice to the voiceless. The narrator reflects on ships at a distance, representing the fulfillment of individual wishes. While some ships come in with the tide, others remain on the horizon, elusive and out of reach, a poignant depiction of life's uncertainties and unfulfilled dreams.

Dolan Hubbard suggests that in Hurston's novel, we see the deep and spiritual aspects of the human desire for transcendence and divine connection:

the classical Biblical picture of the looker standing before the horizon, pondering whether they will ever reach it. The observer perceives a scene encompassing both the temporal and the timeless, the finite and the infinite: The ships on the horizon are emblematic of the dreams of the person standing on shore. This timeless picture speaks of a person's desire to be related to God, the ultimate Other (2007: 37).

Zora Neale Hurston taps into the language of those marginalized within white American society, bringing their stories, struggles, and playful antics to light. Through a very complicated stylistic process, the narrative is intertwined with the past, and from the memory of the main heroine, Janie Mae Crawford, emerges the adventures of an enslaved population, which has become amnesiac of its African origins. Instead, the sinister landmarks of American literary doxa mark the novel: the dogs unleashed on the black man, the lynching of innocents, hatred, hunger, indecent housing, poverty, and incessant ostracism.

Janie's Journeys for Self-discovery

Janie's return to Eatonville frames the actual action of the novel and her telling her friend Phoeby about her adventure and her journey. The story begins beyond the threshold of this frame: Janie's long journey, lyrical and epic, personal, and historical, began long before, at the time of her childhood, in the "white people's back-yard" for which her ex-slave grandmother worked and then in a hut located on the edge of the forest and independent of the white people's property. Her grandmother explains: "And, Janie, maybe it was not much, but Ah done de best Ah kin by you. Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folks' yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillun at school" (*Their Eyes*, pp. 23-24). It marks the initial stage in Janie's extensive quest for independence from white culture.

Janie's journey takes her from the lonely farm of Logan Killicks to the all-Black town of Eatonville with Joe Starks, then to the Everglades, where she works alongside seasonal laborers, before finally circling back to Eatonville, where the novel both begins and ends. Seen in its historical and social context, her story unfolds like a triptych. The first part of her life reflects key moments in American history, stretching from slavery and the Civil War to emancipation and beyond. Here, Janie also comes into contact with the African American middle class, only to grow disillusioned with its values. This opening section shows life as it really is, with its mix of social contradictions, not as an abstract or mythical world but as one shaped by a clear historical and cultural identity. Hurston anchors this by placing Janie's grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks firmly in that social setting. The grandmother's stories, told to convince Janie to marry Logan, draw directly on the tradition of "ex-slave narratives", bringing to life the legacy of slavery, war, and emancipation. For her grandmother, racial prejudice remained an unchanging reality no matter the time period: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out" (*Their Eyes*: 17).

The grandmother recognizes – long before modern feminism articulated it – that the Black woman is subjected to various forms of exploitation, clearly understanding her status as a victim:

Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. *De nigger woman is de mule uh de world* so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (*Ibidem*, emphasis added).

For Janie's grandmother, Logan Killicks represents the safest way to protect her granddaughter from the "double slavery" that had marked the lives of women before her. Although Logan is much older,

and Janie feels only repulsion rather than love for him, she agrees to the marriage. Like many young women, Janie feels she owes a debt to the grandmother who raised her. By marrying Logan, she hopes to grant Nanny peace of mind – that Janie will be spared the physical and sexual violence suffered by earlier generations of women:

Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection... Ah ast de Lawd when you was uh infant in mah arms to let me stay here till you got grown. He done spared me to see de day. Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life (*Their Eyes*: 18).

The grandmother's words, her assurance that God has been on her side and that she will join Him peacefully and properly are deeply religious: "Ah ain't gittin' ole, honey. Ah'm done ole. One mornin' soon, now, de angel wid de sword is gointuh stop by here. De day and de hour is hid from me, but it won't be long" (*Ibidem*). There is a profound sense of African American spirituality, blending religious and poetic elements in the grandmother's words. Her assurance that God has been by her side and that she will peacefully join Him imparts spiritual confidence. Her almost poetic speech suggests a deep connection to the spiritual realm. There is a profound reflection on the complexities and expectations tied to relationships in this exchange between Janie and her grandmother, particularly for Black women viewed in the context of their societal roles. The grandmother's scolding underscores a practical, pragmatic perspective on marriage, emphasizing the security and respect of the union. The focus on "uh prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days" (lifelong support) and "protection" shows a preference for stability and social recognition rather than romantic notions of love.

Expectations and Fulfillment

The grandmother is a spokesperson for petty bourgeois ideals of security through property and of ideals of femininity and status modeled on the white women she served. Sitting on rocking chairs, under the white porches of the manor houses, these images seem to her to be the essence of security. This vision of the world remains the gate, in forms and ideology if not in reality, to the social relations of the enslaved person in the South and is imposed without much subtlety on a new generation whose point of reference is instead the world of modern capitalism and the free market. If the figure of the grandmother takes us back to the history of slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks take us back to the democratic experiment of Reconstruction and its failure – as W.E.B. Du Bois claims – from opportunism, egoism, racism: But the ideal of "forty acres and a mule" – the just and reasonable ambition to own the land that the country had

solemnly promised the formerly enslaved people to fulfill – was destined in many cases to be bitterly disused.

Du Bois' name is associated with his concept of the "Talented Tenth" and with the urban intellectuals of the North from whom the African-American avant-garde was to emerge. In some respects, Killicks and Starks represent the "Talented Tenth" of the South, that is that exceptional minority who had become property owners, thanks to their parsimony rather than to the generosity of the government. Their properties against enormous obstacles; racism makes their capitalism a form of heroism that Hurston certainly recognizes while ruthlessly denouncing their sexism. Logan Killicks, a prototype of the rural version of the self-made man, personifies the ethic of work and self-doing and the ideal of economic autonomy, of capital formation based on property and savings, regardless of political rights and civilians. This rural African-American lower middle class found its leader and political voice in Booker T. Washington. Joe Starks, a more important figure in the novel, refers to a later moment: trade, speculation, and free economic initiative. Janie's romantic resourcefulness and Joe's economic resourcefulness converge in the Janie–Starks couple. Starks, who "spoke for far *horizon*" (*Their Eyes*: 34), reminds us of the urban and entrepreneurial petite bourgeoisie that, in the early twentieth century, found its conscience through the nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, the modern and urban interpreter of Booker T. Washington:

Been workin' for white folks all his life. Saved up some money – round three hundred dollars, yes indeed, right here in his pocket... He had always wanted to be a big voice, but the white folks had all the say-so where he came from and everywhere else, exceptin' this place dat colored folks was buildin' themselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin' (*Their Eyes*: 33).

Joe Starks embodies the archetype of an entrepreneur, speculator, mayor, small capitalist, and shopkeeper, symbolizing the emerging South's inclination to "modernize" by adopting the ethics and model of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie in the North. When Joe Starks arrives in Eatonville, he quickly brings about significant social, economic, and cultural change. He buys two hundred acres of land, pays in cash, and starts building roads, putting up street lamps, opening a shop, setting up a post office, and taking on a leadership role in the town's push for independence. However, even though Starks speaks with the voice of the new Black middle class, the way he shows his wealth and power – his big white house with columns, the polished brass spittoons, and his demand that Janie act like the white women of the old South – points back to the Southern aristocracy. These symbols make it clear how difficult it is to build genuine political autonomy while still being caught in old patterns

of power. Janie slowly realizes that even a marriage that once seemed full of promise has turned into another form of oppression and isolation: “She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her” (*Their Eyes*: 106). The novel highlights the clash between personal dreams, social expectations, and the cultural limits of the time.

The Lost Horizon

With Starks’ illness and death, Janie sees that her grandmother’s material view of life, and the choices it led her to, were tragically wrong. In a moment of sharp break from the past, she denounces this failure in an inner monologue after his funeral:

Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon – for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you – and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love (*Their Eyes*: 107).

Here, Zora Neale Hurston underlines a key moment in the protagonist’s character development and self-realization. Joe Starks becomes a turning point for Janie as she begins to reassess her life and the choices dictated by her grandmother’s economic conception. The mention of the “biggest thing God ever made, the horizon”, symbolizes limitless possibilities, freedom, and potential in life. Janie feels a deep disappointment in her grandmother, who limited her potential and ambitions in the name of what she thought was love. The image of “pinching the horizon” into something small enough to tie around Janie’s neck captures how Nanny’s choices turned the vast possibilities of life into restrictions that left Janie feeling choked. The horizon, with its suggestion of limitless experience, becomes a powerful symbol of the freedom denied to her. In her internal monologue after Joe Starks’ funeral, Janie gives closure to this chapter of her life, using harsh words to condemn the woman who had twisted her in love’s name. This moment marks a turning point: Janie begins to grasp the meaning of her own desires and aspirations, and to see clearly how social expectations and old ideas of love have shaped – and confined – her search for self-discovery.

It marks a moment of liberation as Janie confronts the constraints imposed on her and starts to seek a more authentic and fulfilling path for herself. Later, as she prepares to leave with Tea Cake, Janie explains to Phoeby:

She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me – don’t keer whut it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She didn’t have time tuh think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin’. De object wuz tuh git dere. So

Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin' extry and Ah ain't read de common news yet (*Their Eyes*: 134-135).



There is a sense of alienation that Janie experiences as she grapples with her grandmother's expectations and societal norms. The mention of Grandma being born during slavery sets the historical context, emphasizing the deeply ingrained restrictions placed on black individuals during that era. Grandmother's urging Janie to sit on a particular chair is a seemingly simple action loaded with significance, symbolizing a level of freedom and equality denied to black people at that time.

Grandma's desire for Janie to sit on the porch like a white mistress reflects her aspirations for Janie to attain a status that was traditionally denied to black individuals. The emphasis on the unique chair and the command to stay there implies the rigidity and constraints associated with societal expectations. A desire for social advancement drives Grandma's ambitions for Janie, but the means to achieve this come at the cost of Janie's well-being and freedom.

Janie's expression, "I almost died up there", conveys the profound emotional toll of conforming to societal expectations that alienate her from her authentic self. Sitting on the porch becomes a metaphor for the limitations and stifling expectations placed on Janie, hindering her ability to engage with life authentically and think about her desires and aspirations. The passage captures the internal conflict between societal pressures and individual identity, highlighting the emotional strain and alienation from pursuing societal ideals that do not align with personal fulfillment.

Through Janie's words, Hurston captures the spirit of a generation striving for autonomy, authenticity, and creative expression that transcends the societal expectations and limitations imposed by history and class. It serves as a literary and cultural manifesto, marking a new chapter in the narrative of African American identity and artistic endeavor during this transformative period in American history.

Nature and People

After enduring wasted potential and a stifled childhood, along with a series of marriages, disunions, and disillusiones, Janie faces the challenging journey to reclaim a fragment of her untarnished inner treasure. At this juncture, she experiences love. Janie's third journey takes her to the Everglades, an area that attracts thousands of displaced people, providing them with a place to survive and enjoy life, dance, and have fun. The Everglades feel almost like an Eden in Florida – wild, lush, and untamed – where Janie experiences her most passionate love. Life there is described in vivid, creative, almost allegorical language, full of

playful conversations and slips of the tongue that show both the strength and the struggles of a marginalized community.

However, poverty brings prejudice, and even here skin color divides people, creating a painful form of self-debasement within the African American community, a “dose of negritude”. But nature soon proves stronger than human divisions. A looming hurricane, first noticed by the Seminole Indians and foreshadowed by fleeing animals, shows the immense power of Lake Okeechobee. In its destructive force, the lake becomes like the Last Judgment, sweeping away all differences and affecting everyone in its path.

For Janie, the Everglades reflect the spirit of 19th-century Romanticism: just as English poets once looked to Mediterranean landscapes to escape an alienating society, Janie looks to the deep South and its agricultural workers for a world of freedom and passion – only to find that the power of nature always shadows it.

Nature is generous, and the free proletariat of the Everglades joins in, offering her an experience of renewal. Here, through romantic love with Tea Cake, Janie challenges conventions and breaks the taboos that control social, racial, and sexual relations in bourgeois society: wealthy and light-skinned, she marries a much younger, dark-skinned man; she learns to play chess to shoot, to work in the fields, and she becomes a participant in the popular culture from which Starks had categorically excluded her.

In the Everglades, Janie finds a reconnection with the harmonious relationship with nature that characterized her childhood. The Everglades are shown as vast, fertile, generous, and free. The narrator describes them in a way that feels more like ethnography than Janie’s own voice, highlighting the novel’s interest in different ways of seeing nature. For Janie, the Everglades become the setting for rediscovering a raw and unbound connection with the natural world, free from the limiting views of her grandmother and former husbands. Here, nature is not reduced to property or abstract symbols but is experienced as abundance, freedom, and fertility. However, the same landscape that seems maternal and life-giving also reveals a darker side during the hurricane and flood, when it becomes wild, irrational, primitive, and cruel:

The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed his chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; ... The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel... The lake was coming on. Slower and broader, but coming. It had trampled on most of its supporting wall and lowered its front by spreading. But, it came muttering and grumbling onward like a tired mammoth just the same. (*Their Eyes*: 178-190).

The men who had placed their trust in the white master and the divine master now find themselves peering into the darkness: “The time

was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God.... They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (*Their Eyes*: 186-187). The lesson that the anthropologist Hurston teaches is that the white color and the white man – culture – are perceived as divinity – supernatural – at the same time that nature is ignored. Rather than observe the signs of nature, Tea Cake and others observe the whites first and follow their example; immediately afterward, they look at the horizon – like the male choir of Eatonville with which the novel opens – and see “God”. As anthropologist Hurston comments,

All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise, they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering, men know fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood (*Their Eyes*: 170).

Janie’s trial signifies a return to civil society, institutions, and historical realities – specifically, the racism embedded in the courts during that particular period and location. This trial serves as a reflection of Janie’s initial return to Eatonville, with both instances encapsulating her isolation, alienation, and misunderstanding by both the black laborers present at the trial and the inhabitants of Eatonville gathered around the shop.

In the first group, the laborers find Janie guilty. However, racial biases and Jim Crow laws, which bar African Americans from serving on the jury, prevent them from issuing a legal verdict. Similarly, the second group – the Eatonville choir – acts as a behavioral jury and declares Janie guilty. They, too, sit in judgment as Janie narrates her life story to Phoeby, the last connection between Janie and society. Beyond the novel’s conclusion, Phoeby conveys the meaning of Janie’s experiences to the “all dem sitters-and-talkers” (*Their Eyes*: 170) of Eatonville. Janie’s isolation and misunderstanding are mirrored in both the Everglades trial and the Eatonville gathering. It is an event that underlines the challenges of societal judgment and racism.

Contrary to the reader’s expectation of having read a rebirth novel with a happy ending, the novel’s conclusion portrays Janie as a woman who has returned home but has not, indeed, found a place within society among men and women. Using hieratic gestures, Janie symbolically isolates herself from society and retreats, figuratively burying herself within her house, which takes on the metaphorical characteristics of a tomb. Janie’s action is a final gesture of desperation. In closing, as in the philosophical assumptions of the novel, Hurston belongs to the modernist literature of the early 20th century, which often represents isolated and alienated artists who, from a literal or symbolic underground, curse society and its hypocrisies.

Modeled on that of other Romantic precursors, Janie's journey leads to the discovery that the Romantic ideals espoused by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism cannot be sustained. The impulse to abandon society and find oneself in popular culture and primitive nature leads, for an African-American intellectual, to forms of physical destruction and spiritual alienation even more severe than those encountered in bourgeois society.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel in which the criticism of dominant social and artistic practices results in the most desperate pessimism rather than a new conception of the world, art, and the relationship between art and society. Janie's journey in search of meaning and wholeness fails. In closing, as in the philosophical assumptions of the novel, Hurston belongs to the modernist literature of the early 20th century, which often represents isolated and alienated artists who, from a literal or symbolic underground, curse society and its hypocrisies.

Conclusions

Underlining the dynamics of collaboration and competition between publications during this transformative era has been paramount. It emphasizes how African American women writers challenged stereotypes and depicted diverse experiences. Expanding perspectives is necessary to fully comprehend the unique issues women face, often overlooked in African American history. Exploring spirituality during this period becomes essential, particularly in understanding the experiences of black women who found solace and identity through spiritual practices influenced by traditional African spirituality and Christianity. The significant roles played by black women in religious and community leadership during this transformative era are noted, contributing significantly to the broader narrative of the period.

Moreover, our analysis asserts that Hurston's exploration of African American religious syncretism within the anthology, documenting the blend of beliefs and practices within the community, sheds valuable light on the authenticity and resilience of these traditions. Her documentation of how individuals and communities navigated adversity while staying connected to their cultural and spiritual roots renders her work invaluable for scholars and readers seeking profound insights into the intricacies of the African American experience. We underscore the enduring impact of Hurston's contributions in shaping narratives of African American spirituality and cultural resilience.

Their Eyes Were Watching God has long been regarded as a nuanced exploration of race, class, and gender in post-Reconstruction Florida. The protagonist, Janie Crawford, embarks on a transformative journey, navigating societal constraints dominated by men to assert her identity and independence. The novel critically examines African

American rural life, unraveling layers of oppression experienced by women of color and critiquing the limitations imposed by society.

We contend that Hurston skillfully dissects the complex dynamics between men and women, interweaving the creation of great myths into the narrative. Metaphors related to the horizon imbue profound symbolic meaning, portraying life's uncertainties and unfulfilled dreams for men. The novel explores the concepts of male creativity and God's power, emphasizing the pivotal role of imagination and creative vision in fostering agency and power. Additionally, it illuminates the stories and struggles of marginalized individuals within white American society, reflecting the experiences of an enslaved population severed from its African origins.

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