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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Their Eyes Were Watching God

by Zora Neale Hurston

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938
www.prestwickhouse.com
800.932.4593

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Their Eyes Were Watching God

Notes

Written in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* spans the life of Janie Crawford, a black woman living in Eatonville, a community in the Florida Everglades. The author, Zora Neale Hurston, relates the story in the dialect of the times, rich with local color and colloquialisms, including examples of the black oral tradition. Throughout the story, Janie searches for love, happiness, and her own identity. After a loveless marriage at a young age, Janie finds romance and prosperity with her second husband. Janie soon realizes that the prosperity her family has dreamed of for generations does not guarantee happiness, especially when she is nothing more than another possession to her husband. After his death, Janie finds happiness during her third marriage and finally blossoms into her own identity.

While the text contains what would be considered racial slurs today, they are spoken, for the most part, by the black characters themselves and represent the speech patterns, jargon, and slang of the time.

All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, copyright 1937.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the extent to which the author creates caricatures by exaggerating the actions and attitudes of some of the characters.
2. explain the significance of the title, particularly as it relates to the protagonist's fate.
3. identify the author's use of personification in the novel, particularly in her descriptions of death.
4. explain why this novel is an example of frame narration.
5. discuss the following symbols:
 - the horizon
 - the pear tree
 - the removal of Janie's head rags
6. cite incidents from the novel to support or refute that the following statement reflects a major theme: It is important for people to find their own paths to God and to seek out their own love and happiness in life.
7. support or refute these two additional themes:
 - People in power are often hated.
 - Men do not understand women's feelings.
8. describe how mules are used as a metaphor for the black women's place in their community and black people's place in the white world.
9. write a character sketch of Joe Starks that supports or refutes the idea that he is a static, or flat, character.
10. define folklore and discuss how the porch talk is an example of black folklore.
11. form an opinion on the idea that in the author's view, God does not approve of the following:
 - black men's treatment of and attitudes toward black women
 - white people's view of black men and women
12. discuss the author's view of fate as a driving force in Janie's life.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Nanny's past influence her dreams for Janie's future?
2. Why does Janie agree to marry Logan? In your opinion, does he truly love her?
3. Why does Janie leave her first husband for Joe? What does she want from Joe that Logan is unable to give her?
4. Why does Joe make Janie wear the head rags?
5. Define folktale. How can the mule story be considered a "new" folktale?
6. Trace the life of the old yellow mule in the story. How is it similar to Janie's life with Joe?
7. Discuss the pear tree as a symbol for Janie's dreams about her future. Where else in the story is the pear tree mentioned?
8. Compare Tea Cake and Joe. What does Tea Cake have to offer Janie that Joe cannot supply?
9. Why does Janie accept Tea Cake's gambling and his reasons for staying out all night?
10. Compare the natural surroundings of Eatonville with the Everglades. Which environment does Janie find more attractive?
11. Compare the way Logan tries to get Janie to work in the field with the way Tea Cake tries to get her to work in the fields. Why is one more successful than the other?
12. Trace Janie's family history. From where do her Caucasian features come?
13. Why does Tea Cake dislike Mrs. Turner?
14. What does Tea Cake do to "pay back" Mrs. Turner for her bigoted attitudes?
15. Relate the following quotation from Chapter 18 to the overall theme of the story:

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.
16. Why does Tea Cake not trust the white men that stay in town after the hurricane?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

bander log – group of people with no leader or law
dilated – widened, expanded
pugnacious – aggressive
resignation – an act of surrender
sodden – dull or expressionless
treacherous – not trustworthy, deceptive

1. Who are the sitters referred to in the following quotation? Why does the author compare them to mules?

“These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins.”

2. Find an example of personification in this chapter.

3. Why does Pheoby go to talk to Janie?

4. What is Pheoby saying about the porch sitters in the statement, “An envious heart makes a treacherous ear”?

4. How does Joe explain the odd spectacle of the dead mule on its back with its feet sticking up in the air?

5. Why is Janie excluded from the mule's funeral?

6. Local color is defined as the details and descriptions that are common to a certain place. Some critics point out that Hurston presents the local color of the black community through the stories told on the front porch of the store. Find two examples of local color in this chapter. Briefly state what is learned about the community from the stories.

7. Folklore is the body of customs, superstitions, stories, dances, and songs that have been passed down through oral tradition. In what ways is the story about the mule an example of the town's folklore?

8. What event in Janie's marriage convinces her that Joe is not the wonderful man she thought she was marrying? How does she survive in the marriage without losing her identity?
