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Joe and Janie: Patriarchal Power and Politics in Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Readers and critics alike have admired Zora Neale Hurston's seminal 20th century novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for generations particularly for its complex portrayal of the town of Eatonville, Florida. In showing her childhood hometown's social conventions for what they are, Hurston provides us with a deeply humanistic insight into a town just as flawed, as it is remarkable in its scope and influence. One of the most pronounced of these flawed conventions lies in the gender politics of the town. Despite Eatonville's progressive and historical reputation, Hurston portrays it as a town still steeped in the same patriarchal hegemony that pervades much of the rest of the world around it. This patriarchal hierarchy is exemplified in the marriage of Joe Starks and Janie and how Joe's position of power encourages him to treat Janie as merely an ornament to his own power.

Hurston gives much attention in the novel to Joe Stark's eventual rise to power as the mayor of Eatonville. As Joe's accomplishments in building the town to a respectable standard increase, his desire to flaunt and maintain his prestige among the people in it becomes more pronounced. At the height of Joe's power in Eatonville, Hurston states, "The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about

Joe's positions and possessions, but none had the temerity to challenge him" (58). Regardless of how Eatonville's residents feel about Joe's authority, his power is always assumed and unchallenged. Joe's domineering status among the residents of Eatonville also has a great effect on the role he adopts in his marriage to Janie. After Joe lights the first street lamp in Eatonville, he tells Janie in a conversation "'...Ah told you in de very first beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (Hurst 55). Joe makes it very clear from the moment he achieves his respect and authority in the town that Janie will be living through him. He gives Janie no room for independence because, according to Johnson, "he wants only to put her on a pedestal, to make her an ornament, a testimony to his greatness" (50). Janie's relationship to Joe reveals that Eatonville is not immune to the same gender politics that are pervasive elsewhere in the world. Men like Joe Starks still possess the power to relegate women even as free-spirited as Janie to subservient roles. This allows Joe to treat Janie as another tool to augment his naturally assumed power and influence in the minds of the people.

Janie does not assume her subservient role quietly, however. In fact, she makes a few bold attempts to assert herself as an individual with a distinct voice of her own. The most compelling of these attempts occurs when she first displays her oratory skills on the front porch of Joe's shop, a primary site for the town's vibrant social circle. After he frees an abused mule from a cruel owner, she compares his actions to Abraham Lincoln's freeing of the slaves, and causes Hambo to reply to Starks, "Yo' wife is uh born orator... Us never knowed dat befo'" (Hurst 69). Joe does not encourage any more rhetorical participation of Janie in the town's events,

however, and any further actions of Janie that go outside the acceptable bounds of Joe's demands on her are shut down and denied to her. This naturally causes Janie to continue to attempt her resistance against him through her language, until it is ultimately beaten out of her publicly and privately by Joe's physical abuse. Hurston states, "Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more" (86). Joe's physical dominance of Janie cripples any chance for her to assert her individuality in the town's social and political world. Despite her capability of defending herself through language, Joe ultimately subdues Janie through brute force. Needless to say, his physical abuse is one of the very few things he has left to use in subduing Janie back into her purely ornamental role among the town's social and political hierarchy.

Joe's reasons for beating Janie when she resists his demands on her are not purely out of anger and embarrassment, because they are also bound to the town's expectations of him as a leader. According to Patterson, "Language is central to resistance in the narrative of Janie's marriage to Jody, not as an art but as the politics of a people" (120). Joe feels that he cannot maintain his image of a powerful and accomplished man in the town of Eatonville if Janie is anything short of a silent and submissive trophy wife. He cannot fathom a way of maintaining this image with a wife who is just as, if not more rhetorically gifted than him. Janie is aware of this insecurity however, and she uses it against him when she verbally humiliates him publicly on the shop porch by saying, "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (Hurston 93). This shocking assault on Joe's manhood prompts him to commit an act motivated only on the emotional impulse of his rage and fear,

because there is no rational and rhetorical way to defend himself against this particular resistance of Janie's. He responds by striking her viciously in front of everybody who had witnessed the insult (Hurston 94). The tragedy of this scene is that according to the social conventions of the town, Joe's actions can be justified not only emotionally, but also politically. He is forced to lash out at Janie physically, because her continued resistance would stain his image and disrupt the social fabric of the town he worked so hard to create. His manhood is otherwise threatened if he does not take some domineering action against Janie publicly.

There is little doubt that Hurston's intentions in creating the dynamic between Janie and Joe are highly subversive of the patriarchal dominance present not only in Eatonville but in all of society as a whole. Johnson states, "Janie reflects the narrator's ideological stance against the values of the community. These values place the woman in the position of 'the mule,' always subservient to the male" (69). Even though Joe successfully subdues Janie and keeps her subservient in the eyes of the community until his death, Hurston is constantly reminding us through Janie's resistance that this is not out of any inherent intellectual inferiority on her part. Patterson states that women for Hurston are portrayed as "powerful individuals quite capable of defending themselves" (108). The community values of Eatonville are, therefore, seen as highly flawed and unfortunately stifling in their efforts to suppress feminine free spirits, such as Janie's. The only thing that is capable of overpowering her in Eatonville is brute force, and even the limits of that method are shown by the novel's end.

Hurston's awareness of the flawed humanity present even in cities with deep-seeded pride, such as Eatonville, is often praised by modern critics for its complexity and general effectiveness in subverting the patriarchal dominance present at the time. Hurston's portrayal of Eatonville is honest and rough on the issue of patriarchy, but it is not meant to keep African-American women complacent in sulking over their condition. Women like Janie are still shown to be capable of great strength and profound wisdom in spite of their oppression, even if it is met with physical abuse from their husbands. The ideal feeling the reader is expected to feel is, therefore, one of great empowerment in subjugation. It ultimately celebrates the ability of free spirits, such as Janie's, to break barriers and pave the way for a future uninhibited by the limitations of patriarchal dominance.

Works Cited

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