

Day Three

1. View page 1 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* manuscript (from the Beinecke Library, Yale University):
http://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/hurstonarchive/images/text_images/1018962.jpg

Zora Neale Hurston wrote the novel in lightning speed, which is visible when viewing the first page of her manuscript. She had gone to Haiti on a research mission to investigate voodoo gods in 1936 and immediately fell in love with the island, feeling “a peace I have never known anywhere else on earth” (Hemenway 230). The spirituality of the island awakened emotions in her that had been “dammed up,” particularly related to an unhappy love affair that she had just ended in New York City (see the chapter on “Love” in *Dust Tracks on a Road*). She admits, “I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (Hemenway 231). She quickly wrote the novel in seven weeks. Students can see that she composed the story with few crossing out of words, and J.B. Lippincott published the manuscript in 1937 with very little revision.

2. The Novel’s Characters

A. *Janie Crawford*

Janie can be viewed through the following powerful metaphors that Hurston uses to describe her:

The Pulpit

- Janie, her mother, and grandmother, Nanny, are all impacted by the legacy of slavery. When Nanny laments about her lost opportunities in life—“Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (15)—she means that her goal for Janie is to find a secure place in life based on property, a destiny that was not possible for her, a slave and now a former slave. According to Houston Baker, Jr.: “Having been denied a say in her own fate because she was property, she assumes that only property enables expression.” Nanny’s intentions, though, are good; above all, she wants to protect Janie

from the racism and sexism that she had experienced in her life. But, she errs in thinking that property will bring happiness, security, or love.

The Mule of the World

Nanny warns Janie: “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). She explains that the white man is “de ruler of everything.” When he “throw down de load,” the black man picks it up and hands it to the black woman to tote. Therefore, Nanny envisions a new world and prays that it will be different for Janie. Compare this image with the one of empowerment in Hurston’s essay, “How It Feels to be Colored Me.”

The Pear Tree

Nanny does not consider love, passion, and sexuality in her design for Janie’s life. When Janie falls in love—or, rather, lust—with Johnny Taylor, Hurston uses the image of the blossoming pear tree to explain the overwhelming new feelings flooding her consciousness (10-11). Hurston refers to the fertility of the tree as a “mystery,” that leads to “marriage” and a “revelation.” If Janie, with her “glossy leaves and bursting buds,” were to give in to her feelings for Johnny, she would then become rooted, even stuck in her destiny. (Later, Hurston uses the force of the hurricane to uproot Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake).

B. *Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, Vergible Woods (Tea Cake)*

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Amy Crittenden laments the fact that the legacy of slavery has caused men, such as her husband Ned, unthinkingly to abuse their children:

“We black folks don’t love our chillun. We couldn’t do it when we wuz in slavery. We borned ‘em but dat didn’t make ‘em ourn. Dey b’longed tuh Old Massa. Twan’t no use in treasurin’ other folkses property. It wuz liable tuh be took uhway any day, But we’s free folk now. De big bell done rung! Us chillun is ourn.” (5)

As a trained anthropologist, Hurston understood the bitter consequences of slavery upon the African-American man and woman. She was before her time in recognizing that by denying the black male the opportunity to take possession of his life, he was denied his manhood.

She also recognized that without a strong father figure in the family, the black woman was forced to adapt masculine qualities as head of the household. Consequently, the male's character disintegrated into weakness, which often resulted in physical and mental abuse not only to his family but to others. On the other hand, the black woman shouldered the burden of bringing strength to the family.

This sequence of events illuminates the oppressive situation of Afro-American life after the Civil War, particularly regarding the rancorous relationship between the sexes. From the perspective of the present day, Toni Cade Bambara agrees: "One of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between men and women" (Patterson x). Orlando Patterson in *Rituals of Blood* describes slavery's devastating legacy: "the single greatest focus of ethnic domination was the relentless effort to emasculate the Afro-American male in every conceivable way and at every turn" (xiii). Slavery, according to Patterson, as an institution, undercut and destroyed Afro-American males' vital roles as husbands and fathers:

[slavery] was most virulent in its devastation of the roles of father and husband. The reason is obvious. Slavery was quintessentially about one person assuming, through brute force and the legalized violence of his government, absolute power and authority over another. The slave was reduced in law and civic life to a nonperson. He or she was socially dead as a legal entity (a person with independent capacities or rights or powers) and as a civic being (a recognized member of the sociopolitical order). As a person in law and civic society, the slave did not exist but instead was a mere surrogate of the master. Hence, the status and role of husband could not exist under slavery, since it meant having independent rights in another person and, in both the U.S. South and West Africa, some authority over her. Fatherhood could also not exist, since this meant owning one's children, having parental power and authority over them. Both infringed upon the power of the master and were therefore denied in law and made meaningless in practice. (27)

Thus, Ned in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* can not be entirely blamed for not knowing the proper way to parent Amy's son, John. Fatherhood was, at best, a "marginal role" for Afro-American men, according to Patterson. It was not a "base of self actualization"; instead, it was "a site of shame and humiliation" (21). As a slave, Ned could offer his children nothing: "no

security, no status, no name, no identity" (32). Once emancipated, he continues the pattern and disclaims any need to change.

Not only was the parental bond broken between Afro-American males and their offspring, but also the one that bound men to women. Patterson raises a series of questions that highlight the powerlessness that also occurred in their role as husbands:

Could he monopolize his partner's sexual services and guarantee that her progeny were in fact his own? Could he protect her from the sexual predation of other men? Could he at least partly provide for her materially? Could he prevent her from being brutalized and physically punished by other men? Could he prevent her from being torn from the place where she was brought up, bundled like cargo, and sold away from him, her children, her kinsmen, and her friends? If the slave could do none of these things, then the role of husband had been devastated. (32)

C. Discussion Questions

1. Why do we need to read and study the writings of Zora Neale Hurston today?
2. Why should we recall the Old South, as represented by Nanny? Does Janie respect her advice? How do Janie's values differ from Nanny's?
3. What are the gender issues in the novel, beginning with Nanny's position during the slavery and post-slavery eras?
4. How does Janie handle her patriarchal society? Why does she put up with Tea Cake's beating of her and theft of her money?
5. What do you think is Hurston's view of gender relations by the end of the novel?
6. Discuss the symbolism in the novel. Explain the significance of the title in relation to the novel's themes.

Works Cited

- Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1980.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. New York: Harper, 1990.
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- Patterson, Orlando. *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two*

American Centuries. Washington, DC: Civitas, 1998.