

Day Four

1. Modernism: Finding Meaning in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Besides being a key member of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston also belonged to the group of great 20th-century American Modernists. In the 1940s, her dream was to join Scribner's, which published Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wolfe, and Rawlings. She finally achieved her goal in 1947 when famed Scribner's editor, Maxwell Perkins, accepted *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Unfortunately, he died two months later, and Hurston was denied the chance to work with him.

Along with the other Scribner's authors, Hurston shared many of the same Modernist characteristics. After their experiences with World War I, they searched for meaning in a post-WWI world, which they viewed as a waste land (read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*).

Definition of Modernism: Modernism is an early 20th-century artistic movement that attempted to develop a response to the social, political, and economic breakdown that occurred as a result of World War I.

Characteristics:

- Modernist works are autonomous and represent self-contained worlds/systems/metanarratives of their own. Artists often borrow such a system in order to structure their work, in face of the chaos and breakdown of contemporary life. An example is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is based on Homer's *Odyssey*.
- The work of art should be unique and represent the cultural avant-garde in such a way that it shocks the bourgeoisie.
- Works of art are fragmented and notable for what's missing, i.e., explanations, connections, and summaries that provide continuity, perspective, and security. Art represents the discontinuous universe.
- Modernist artists believe that art is meaningful. The decline in religion led artists to seek spiritual meanings in art.
- Therefore, the artist has a sacred role to search for poetic illumination among the philistines. This venture often led to a feeling of alienation. [from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, "Modernism"]

For purposes of contrast, postmodernism can also be discussed:

Definition from Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*:

- “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it . . . The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on . . . Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different languages games—a heterogeneity of elements.

Linda Hutcheon:

- "Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it literature, painting, sculpture, film video, dance, television, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics of historiography" (Linda Hutcheon).

[Note: One of the most significant patrons of postmodernist works of architecture is Disney].

The great modernist work is T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published after World War I. All great Modernist works, including Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, deal metaphorically with the theme of the blighted land and the sick Fisher king. Restoration comes with the return of water. At the end of *The Waste Land*, rain finally falls to restore the land as the narrator is fishing by the side of a river.

In our postmodernist world, each reader can take the signs found in a text and interpret them in any way he or she wishes. The reader becomes the author (see Jacques Derrida, “The Death of the Author”). Common critical approaches include historical, gender-based, reader-response, etc. Following are ways to regard the ending of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and reflect upon Hurston’s worldview.

II. Approaches to Meaning in the Novel

A. Historical Approach

The hurricane marks the turning point in Janie Crawford's life. Her new state of empowerment is a direct result of the hurricane's power. The storm as a metaphor has always symbolized creation and regeneration, because it involves the mingling of the elements. By uniting the four elements—air (wind), water (rain), fire (rays of light), which disturb the fourth element, earth—the hurricane suggests cosmic synergy. Primitive peoples, such as early Native Americans, worshipped the hurricane as a “deity of the winds and waters, and also of the heavens.”

Hurston based her storm on three hurricanes in 1927, 1928, and 1935. The 1928 category-four hurricane overflowed Lake Okeechobee and 1800 migrant workers drowned. Hurston experienced firsthand the 1929 hurricane in the Bahamas. She recalls: “It was horrible in its intensity and duration. I saw dead people washing around on the streets when it was over.” Hurston was in New York during the 1935 hurricane, the worst in recorded history. It was a category-five hurricane with sustained winds of 200 miles per hour and gusts of 250 mph. It was so forceful that the sky lit up, ignited by particles of sand hitting each other to create electric sparks. Many of the 408 people who died were sandblasted to death.

Hurston personifies the storm in her novel: “The monstropolous beast had left its bed. . . . The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel” (53). It takes a catastrophe of such magnitude to bring Janie in touch with God as the creator of earthly disturbances and maker of destinies.

B. Gender Approach

Directions: Divide students into groups and ask them to interpret the following quotations, citing examples from the novel:

“It is, however, not mere men who oppress in this novel but ideology—the ponderous presence of an overarching system of patriarchal domination” (Ann DuCille).

“Hurston has motivated her narrative, perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination and to free Janie, a figure for herself, from all men” (Dianne Sadoff).

“Tea Cake’s death represented the closure necessary for Janie’s and Hurston’s psychospiritual freedom. It also acquired an autocephalous status for Hurston. She was freed from external, patriarchal control. No longer entrapped by gender roles and expectations, she and Janie can follow wherever the inside urge leads” (Deborah Plant).

Next, discuss Janie’s search for identity, which becomes her rite of passage. Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* explains how these stages develop:

1. Separation from a fixed, “normal” condition.
2. Movement through a “timeless” and “statusless” marginality. [i.e. the muck].
3. Reincorporation into a new, fixed social state with a new status.

Referring to Van Gennep’s stages, Houston Baker applies them to the Afro-American experience:

- Stage 1: The black person separates from the dominant white culture [as in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*].
- Stage 2: Renewal of desire, receipt of ancestral wisdom, negation of dominant culture’s schemes of re-(w)riting (and righting) history.
- Stage 3: Reintegration, with a new status and awareness of an enduring black difference.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the symbolism in the novel. Explain the significance of the title in relation to the novel’s themes.
2. What is Janie’s state of mind at the end of the novel? Has she transcended patriarchy? According to Houston Baker, she is transforming into a blues singer. Do you agree that she is becoming an artist, by examining the last paragraph of the novel?
3. On the other hand, another critic claims that she has contracted rabies and is preparing to die. What do you think of her fate?

Works Cited

- Baker, Houston, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Chicago: U. Chicago P, 1984.
- DuCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. NY: Oxford, 1993.
- Plant, Deborah. *"Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom": The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston*. Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1995.