Critical Essay: Their Eyes Were Watching God Essay, Research Paper

CRITICAL ESSAY: THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

It all begins with parents. However, although genetics play a key role in what kind

of person one becomes, environment is the other major factor that influences a person?s

development. The people a person meets and the experiences one has are very important

elements affecting development. With the three marriages Janie has, she develops as a

woman. In each marriage she learns valuable lessons, leading to progressively better

relationships, realizing how a person is to live his/her life. In Their Eyes Were Watching

God, by Zora Neale Hurston, Janie?s three marriages lead her to self-knowledge and thus

to fulfillment.

Janie?s marriage to Login Killicks provides her with the realization that marriages

do not necessarily guarantee mutual love. Her pre-marital concept of love and marriage is

symbolized in the natural union of bee and flower:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the

visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible

voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom;

the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the

tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So

this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (p.11)

In this dream, Janie conveys her idea of marriage being the culmination of love, of two

separate entities becoming one and growing together. To the rest of society, as

represented by Login Killicks and her grandmother, marriage is not about love, but is

rather a business deal that only includes protection and procreation. Her grandmother

says, ??Tain?t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it?s protection.?(p.15) These

beliefs run contrary to everything that Janie has wished and hoped a marriage to be: ?Ah

wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think.?(p.24),

a marriage that is filled with an equal and physical love. When she questions her

grandmother, Nanny continually indoctrinates her with views of marriage she does not

accept. She finally relents and marries Login Killicks. As her marriage unfolds, Janie

begins to question herself and why she had yielded to views that she never believed in.

?Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel like the sun

the day?? (p.21). Eventually, she comes to the realization that, ?marriage did not make

love. Janie?s first dream was dead, so she became a woman.?(p.25)

In her marriage to Joe Starks, Janie soon learns that her new womanhood serves

only to reflect his position and wealth. From the beginning of their relationship, signs

indicate that Joe is not necessarily the love Janie is looking for. ?On the train the next day,

Joe didn?t make many speeches with rhymes to her, but he bought her the best things the

butcher had…? (p.34) The effect money has on Joe?s life is already apparent. He buys her

only material things because he is ownership-oriented. Janie notices the problem early in

the relationship and confronts Joe about it, saying ?it jus? looks lak it keeps us in some

way we ain?t natural wid one nother. You?se always off talkin? and fixin? things, and Ah

feels lak Ah?m jus? markin time. Hope it soon gits over.? (p.46) His response greatly

depicts his view of her. ?Over, Janie? I god, Ah ain?t even started good. Ah told you in de

very beginnin? dat Ah aimed tuh be a big voice. You oughta be glad, cause dat make uh

big woman outa you.? (p.46) Janie realizes that she cannot be open with Joe; he is no

longer the man she had met by the water pump. Joe has many of his own interests, none of

which are concerned with Janie. ?She found out that she had a host of thoughts she had

never expressed to him…She was saving up feelings for some man that she had never

seen.? (p.72) He continues to treat Janie as a reflection of himself when he wants her to

appear attractive; love at only a material level. ?Jody told her to dress up and stand in the

store all that evening…and he didn?t mean for nobody else?s wife to rank with her.? (p.41)

Joe also suppresses Janie, both as a woman and a human being, and sets a limit on her

self-fulfillment, treating her more like an object than a woman. He lumps women in with

mere things: ?Somebody got to think for women and chilun and chickens and cows.?

(p.71) All in all, throughout her marriage she learns that wealth does not bring happiness.

Finally realizing that she is only another possession of Joe Starks, she says, ?You done

lived wid me for twenty years and you don?t half know me atall. And you could have but

you was so busy worshippin? de works of yo? own hands, and cuffin? folks around in their

minds till you didn?t see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have.?(p.86) After Joe dies,

she also concludes that she had been missing something in her life, and realizes the next

man she meets is perfect for her. Janie?s development as a woman becomes complete after

living and learning with Vergible ?Tea Cake? Woods.

Tea Cake catalyzes the final stage of development of Janie as a woman. From Tea

Cake, Janie learns to love and what it feels like to be loved. He represents everything Janie

has ever wanted in a marriage:

She couldn?t make him look like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts

to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with

every step he took. Spice hung about him. He was a glance from God. (p.106)

Tea Cake not only encourages her growth to independence, but contributes to it by

teaching her skills such as hunting and checkers, while at the same time, praising her for

her talents. He further proves this by taking her fishing, hunting, dancing, and gardening

with her. For a while, Janie and Tea Cake even work the fields together. For the first time

in her life, Janie enjoys life because she experiences what it feels to be loved. She says

?…we ain?t got nothin? tuh do but do our work and come home and love? (p.133). Tea

Cake has none of the financial stability of the first two men, but has an openness of mind

that allows Janie to escape from people?s expectations. He makes Janie realize that she

must decide what she wants out of life, and discovers she hated the limitations Nanny

imposed on her self-fulfillment: ?Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the

horizon…and pinched it into such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her

granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her.? (p.89) From her marriage with Tea

Cake, Janie finally lives her dream of love and believes it is something very few people

ever get to experience. Janie?s marriage with Tea Cake brings her to a final stage of

self-realization.

Janie clearly progresses in her development as a woman through the marriages she

has had with three very different men. Logan Killicks is her starting place and from him

she learns that she was missing a mutual love. Although Janie feels Joe Starks would

provide her with what she thinks is love, it is only a show to win her over, eventually

giving way to his ulterior motive of building a name for himself. His death gives Janie a

new chance, allowing Tea Cake the privilege of being the next to marry Janie and the

opportunity to teach her what it is to love and to be loved. Janie began the process of

becoming a woman when her first dream was broken and continues and completes her

growth as a person through the joys and sorrows, the disappointments and fufillments of

her three marriages.