Oppression In Their Eyes Were Watching God Essay, Research Paper

The Use of Race in Their Eyes Were Watching God

This novel, while poetically conveying a black woman’s pursuit of true love, seriously addresses society’s ability to be judgmental and oppressive. Gender, race, economic security, and social stratification share equally important roles in the development of the main character, Janie. Hurston vividly describes how each qualification specifically affects the character, although the racial implications are much more subtle. This subtlety allows the reader to mistakenly perceive indifferent or positive feelings towards the novel s black community.

Hurston initially establishes the ideal unimportance of race by using Janie’s innocent childhood memory. Janie painfully recalls Mr. Washburn, who is the father of the family with whom they live, abusively laughing at her belief of being the same as his white children. She also remembers being teased by the other black children for her clothing, which is better than others because hers is the Washburn children s old clothing. This recollection is multiply used by Hurston. It capitalizes children s acceptance of people for their actions, which is surpassingly more believable than portraying adults with the same feelings. It displays the dependence of black people on white people for success. Finally, it instates the Washburn family as the representation of white culture; accordingly initiating a negative undertone towards Janie s ethnicity. However, these prejudices and their undermining effect depicted within the novel are soundly contrasted by Janie s peaceful disposition at the end of her narration.

Hurston masterfully uses the emotional responses of the black characters, specifically pertaining to successful and potentially successful endeavors of Joe, as metaphors of society s prejudice. The initial astonishment of the black characters to Joe s monetary holdings and accomplishments deftly conveys this idea. Hurston again attaches a plethora of meaning to these scenes. Joe is followed by the men from town, while going to purchase the land, because they do not believe a black man could have money. His house s description, as overly opulent and making the others seem as servant s quarters, is parallel to the rich white men of other towns. He faults the lazy black men for the town s lack of development, portraying the incapability of black men for leadership. He is revered by the town when he is present, then slandered when he is no longer able to hear them. Despite being freed from slavery, during the early 1900 s, black people s lives are mostly unchanged. The similarity between their work now as farmhands and formally as slaves is an active personification of this theory. The only successful black man is Joe. The other black characters either are sharecroppers or are menially employed. This explains the contempt the two men on the porch have for Joe, which is the same contempt that they would have for a white man. Black men seldom had the opportunity, but more importantly the financial ability, to own property. This makes wealthy and successful black men extremely scarce. White men owned virtually everything. Therefore, Joe s entirety equally represents the dominating white man and the extremely unlikely black man s success.

Mrs. Turner, while sharing Janie s mixed racial background, speaks adamantly against blacks. She insultingly and unsuccessfully suggests that Janie marry a lighter skinned man than Tea Cake. The duality of Mrs. Turner s perspective is profound. Her attitudes exploit oppressive white sentiments, while simultaneously expressing the effect slavery and continued oppression has on the black community. She implies that black people deserve injustice. Not using a white character to display these attitudes allows Hurston more tenacity in her expression.

Attempting to clean the yard after the hurricane, Tea Cake is approached by two white men. His initial reaction is to run before they see him, which he does not do. The men call him by the wrong name and coerce him into burying the dead. This occurs within the emotional and tragic scene of loss and devastation, making the power exerted by the white men easily overlooked. They carry guns, a symbol of power, and insist that no coffin be wasted on the body of a black person and that no white person be dumped in a grave. The value society places on a black persons life is clearly made here.

In the courtroom, interaction between white people and black people is shown. However, throughout the scene, Janie s dialogue is conveyed by the narrator. Hurston implies the unworthiness of Janie and of black people by Janie not speaking directly with the jury, judge, and attorney. The reference to the 12 white men being annoyed by the interruption of their daily routine simply to be the jury in a black woman s trial, express his how worthless Janie feels within society. This fully explains her innermost and unconscious feelings. Though seemingly subtle, Hurston emphatically describes Janie s state of mind using this method of exposing emotions.

Despite these examples of injustice towards people, solely because of their skin color, the novel does not portray Hurston as a bigot. Without conveying an image of a racially accepting society and having Janie realize that her happiness is dependent exclusively on her reactions to external stimulus, the novel closes with positive feelings. The author places the responsibility for personal happiness on Janie, and subsequently, the reader.