Their Eyes Were Watching God 5 Essay, Research Paper

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Plot (Synopsis)

When Janie returns to Eatonville, the whole town seems to turn out to watch her walk down the street by herself and up to her own house. She had disappeared some years before, with a young man named Tea Cake. The townspeople wonder why he has not returned with her. In fact, the town is viciously curious, but only Pheoby Watson cares enough about Janie to go and visit her, bringing some dinner and lending a friendly ear. Janie decides to tell her friend Pheoby the whole story of her life.

Janie’s story begins in the backyard of her grandmother’s white employers, where she realizes she is darker-skinned than the white children she has always lived around. Janie has lived a conservative childhood, for she is being raised by her protective and traditional grandmother. When her grandmother sees her kissing a local boy over the garden fence, she grows worried about Janie’s future and marries her off to an older neighbor, Logan Killicks, a man with property who can “protect” her. The marriage is not happy for Janie.

Her grandmother dies, and after a short time, Janie escapes from Logan. She marries Joe Starks, and they go to live at a new black settlement called Eatonville. Joe is an ambitious man. He becomes mayor of the new town, opens a store, builds a big white house, and runs the post office. He wants Janie to act like the wife of an important man, just as he directs. He also wants her to run the store and obey his other commands. Janie, however, wants to live like the other townsfolk, who talk and laugh on their porches and are involved in social events. Although Janie puts up with Joe’s mistreatment, life is not pleasant for her. One day after almost twenty years of marriage, Joe humiliates her once again in front of people in the store and she stands up for herself for the first time. Janie tells him a thing or two about his aging self. As a result, Joe shuts her out of his life. Joe soon becomes ill, but still refuses to speak to Janie. One day, when she feels she can take it no longer, Janie burst s into his sick room and tells him what has been wrong with their marriage. Joe looks away from her and dies.

Although the town expects her to be in mourning, Janie feels free of a heavy weight and begins to live her life with her own thoughts. Although she is a wealthy widow, she still tends the store. She also has plenty of suitors, but none she likes; she thinks they are boring and eager for her money. One day, while the whole town is away at a ball game, a stranger comes by the store and ends up joking and talking to Janie. The young man, whose name is Tea Cake, teaches her to play checkers and generally makes her feel like a regular person with a playful heart. Although Janie is very cautious of his attentions and their age difference, he keeps coming around and taking her out. He finally declares that he loves her and wants to marry her. They leave town, get married, and start a very different sort of life for Janie.

Tea Cake is a gambler and a good-timer. At first he is reluctant to take Janie into the society of his friends, but she convinces him that she wants to live life beside him, not as a possession. Joe agrees. One day they go down to “the muck” to pick green beans, live in a shanty, play music and dance, and have a good time. Trouble arrives when one of Janie’s questionable friends wants to hook her up with her brother. Though Janie has no intention of doing so, Tea Cake beats her to show the world who is boss. Janie is hurt, but remains silent about the beating. When a hurricane threatens “the muck”, Tea Cake refuses to leave. Then the dam of a nearby lake collapses, and the couple has to run for their lives. During their exhausting escape, Janie is swept into a deep stream of moving water and tries to save herself by holding onto a cow who is swimming the current. Unfortunately, the cow also has a mad dog on its back. The dog threatens to attack Janie and bites Tea Cake when he comes to her rescue.

After surviving the storm, Janie and Tea Cake stay in Palm Beach so he can recover. Before he is well, he decides they should go back to the muck. There he gets progressively sicker. Janie calls in a doctor, who gives her the bad news: Tea Cake has rabies and will probably not survive. She tells the doctor that money is no object, and he says he will try to locate some medicine and bring it soon. The next day, however, Tea Cake grows progressively more paranoid and attacks Janie with a pistol. She knows that he does not know what he doing and is in terrible pain. She shoots him and holds him as he dies. The people of the muck turn against her.

Janie is immediately tried for murder by an all-white jury and judge. Fortunately, the white doctor comes to her defense, telling about Tea Cake’s illness and how Janie cared for him. Janie then tells the court about her love for Tea Cake. She is set free. After having a funeral for Tea Cake, she leaves the much and then walks home to Eatonville. Her arrival in town is where the story begins.

Sitting on her porch with Pheoby, Janie takes her tired feet from a warm pan of water and tells her friend that she has her permission to tell her story to all the curious folks in town. Janie feels she has nothing to hide; she has loved, been loved, and dared to really live life. Pheoby is impressed by the story and admires Janie’s determination. After Pheoby leaves, Janie shuts up her house and goes to bed, thinking about Tea Cake. Her life is peaceful.

noon, she discovers that her two-hundred dollars are missing. All day and all night go by without a word from Tea Cake, and the next morning Janie thinks about Mrs. Tyler. A widow in her fifties with a house and insurance money, Mrs. Tyler developed a liking for younger men. After she spent her money on them, they always left her. The last one persuaded her to sell her house and follow him to Tampa, where he stole all her money and abandoned her. She had left Eatonville crammed into sexy clothes and sure of herself; she returned a broken and pathetic old fool, hanging and hungry. A grown daughter took her in to die. The images of Mrs. Tyler haunt Janie. She prays to God that Tea Cake still loves her, for she has waited a long, lonely time for him in her life.

At sundown, Janie goes into an unsound sleep. A bit later she hears a guitar in the hall, and Tea Cake walks in strumming and grinning. He sees that she is upset and guesses that it is about the money. He assures her that he has not spent it on another woman and teases her about doubting his love for her. She calls him a “lil boy rooster.” He insists on eating before he will tell her the story.

When he found all Janie’s money, Tea Cake got “excited and felt like letting folks know who he was.” He ran into some friends and wanted to spend some money on them, to feel like a millionaire. He decided to give a big feast, free to his friends, with chicken, biscuits, macaroni, and music. He tells how one man came and made trouble, being picky about the free food, and how another two men nearly started a fight; Tea Cake successfully settled the problems. When Tea Cake realized that the guitar player only knew a few songs, he bought the guitar and had fun playing himself. Janie wonders why he did not come and get her for all the fun. Tea Cake claims that he wanted to, several times, but he did not believe that a high-brow like her would like such goings on and that he did not want her to leave him when she saw his low-class friends. He had made a vow to himself when they married that he would not drag her down.

Janie tells him that she will kill him if he ever goes off to have fun without taking her again. She wants to be part of all of his life. He agrees and assures her that he will return the money, for his payday is coming up. He plans to win her money back by gambling. He tells her he is one of the best gamblers God ever made. Janie watches him throw dice and play cards all week, practicing up. On payday, he buys a new switchblade and two decks of cards, cuts a piece of Janie’s hair off for good luck, and goes off to win the money. Janie waits all evening, worrying about the idea of Tea Cake being a gambler and deciding that it does not matter what other folks think about such things because she knows he is a good man. She thinks about the knife he has purchased and hopes no one hurts him.

Around daybreak, Tea Cake returns, cut up and bleeding, but he has won back Janie’s money and more. Janie dresses his wounds while he tells the story of a man who could not quit betting against him. The more the man lost, the madder he grew. The man finally jumped Tea Cake and cut him with a razor, but Tea Cake got him back. Janie cries. Then Tea Cake gives her two hundred dollars and tells her to put it in the bank, for he needs no help to feed and clothe his woman. He promises that when he is healed, they will go down to the muck, where cane and beans are raised, saying they will have fun there. As Tea Cake drifts off to sleep, Janie watches him and feels a “self-crushing love;” in the process, her “soul crawled out from its hiding place.”

When Tea Cake is better, he heads to the muck with Janie, as promised. The Everglades, Lake Okechobee, the beans, and the sugar cane are all huge to her. She has never seen such fertile, deep black, rich soil. Since they arrive before planting season, they get a house near one of Okechobee’s dikes, and Tea Cake gets a good position. Other people come, Indians wander through, and the planting is done. Janie and Tea Cake leisurely pass their time, going fishing and waiting for picking season. Tea Cake decides they should go hunting. When he teaches Janie to use a gun, she becomes an excellent shot. Janie and Tea Cake bring in lots of game and sell alligator parts in Palm Beach.

People start arriving for picking season; they are mostly poor and broken itinerant workers taking up every available space. The joints are filled up every night with drinkers, singers, and fighters. There seems to be plenty of money and love. Outrageous prices are exacted, but these people spend their money easily, living for today and not worrying about tomorrow.

Janie’s life on the muck is never dull. At first the people had thought she was stuck up, but soon they see she acts like one of them. During work hours, Tea Cake is always popping in to see how his wife is doing, so she decides to go to work with him. He assures her that he wants to take care of her, and she assures him that she likes to work with him and to love him. “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet.” People gather round while he plays guitar, and Janie makes big pans of baked beans, maybe dessert, or rabbit if she has been hunting. People come to gamble on their porch, and generally it reminds Janie of Eatonville, except more fun. The muck people may be “rough,” but they know how to enjoy life and include everyone.

Then Janie learns about jealousy. A young girl, Nunkie, starts hanging around Tea Cake out in the fields. She teases him, finds excuses to be near him, and generally gets too close. Other folks begin to notice the Nunkie episodes. One day Janie finds the two of them off ’struggling’ in the cane and is furious; she yells at them and chases the girl away. Tea Cake finds Janie at home and tries to talk, but she lashes out at him. As he fends off her blows, they tumble from room to room, but Tea Cake will not let go of her hands. They struggle on until their bodies take over, working it out in embrace. The next morning Janie asks Tea Cake if he loves Nunkie; even though she believes he does not want Nunkie, she wants to hear his denial. Tea Cake says a woman like Nunkie is nothing compared to his amazing Janie.

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