Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Study Essay, Research Paper

Tobey Teague

Gallagher

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Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Study

Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God treats society as something that inhibits rather than advances the cause of our personal freedom. This is evident throughout the novel – from the beginning, when Nanny lectures Janie on white society, to the end, when Janie returns to Eatonville from her time spent in freedom with Tea Cake. Gayle writes: “The image depicted in the philosophy of her ‘Nanny’ was one of stagnation and circumscription, one which denied freedom” (Gayle 146). Through the first half of the story, Janie is forced to live in a society that she did not choose. She is forced to marry Logan Killicks, who by most measures of society would be the perfect husband. After all, he has sixty acres and he owns his house. But this society inhibits Janie’s personal freedom because she does not love Killicks, cannot bring herself to love him, and she is literally stuck out in the sticks at “a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been” (Hurston 21). Added to that, Nanny was wrong regarding Killicks. He does not give her security. He treats her like a mule.

Along comes Joe Starks, promising her a better life if she will run away with him and become his wife. Wanting to escape the loneliness and constriction of a loveless marriage, Janie allows Joe Starks to liberate her from Killicks, as well as from her home and the surroundings in which she was reared. She sneaks off with Joe with visions of deliverance and freedom.

What better place for two blacks to have a fresh beginning, a fresh life, a fresh society than in a town whose population is one hundred percent black? And free from the mighty white man’s rule? And free of old memories of slavery handed down by Nanny? Eatonville! It was Janie’s new beginning with her new husband, a new town where, surely, she would feel free to love and would enjoy the freedom that accompanies a love that is free. But there was a problem, and the problem was her new husband, who took her freedom and twisted it into a rag hat that was much too tight for Janie’s mind. Joe Starks took the lazy freedom that was the Eatonville at their arrival and transformed it into a society that inhibited Janie’s personal freedom.

From the minute he and Janie step into the town limits of Eatonville, Joe begins to take over, insisting that in order for Eatonville to be a town, it must have a mayor, a post office, a meeting place, and it must incorporate – the trappings of society. “So maybe Ah better tell yuh in case you don’t know dat if we expect tuh move on, us got tuh incorporate lak every other town. Us got tuh incorporate, and us got tuh have uh mayor, if things is tuh be done and done right” (Hurston 43). Society comes to Eatonville through Joe Starks and his store. The store is the meeting place for the town and it is where the post office is located. Joe Starks is mayor, landlord, postmaster, and owner of the seat of society, which is the store. But from the beginning, he restricts Janie’s freedom. When the citizens of Eatonville want her to say a few words, Joe cuts them and Janie off short: “Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (Hurston 43). And Janie “went down the road behind him that night feeling cold” (Hurston 43).

When the town folk sit on the store’s porch and talk and laugh and make jokes, they are outside the store, on the perimeter of society rather than dead in the middle of it, and on the perimeter they have more freedom. They can laugh and make noise; they can spit without a spittoon and even talk about the mayor. As Hurston writes: “When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to” (Hurston 51). This is freedom, and Janie longs to sit on the porch and enjoy some of the freedom provided by being on the perimeter of society, but Joe won’t allow it. He forbids her to join in the laughter and the jokes, telling her it is beneath her. So, as Janie longed for the freedom of the porch, the perimeter of society, she came to hate the inside of the store, society itself, because it took her freedom from her. Hurston writes: “She had come to hate the inside of that store anyway. That Post Office too. People always coming and asking for mail at the wrong time. . . . The store itself kept her with a sick headache. . . . Such a waste of life and time” (Hurston 54).

Whenever Janie tried to rebel against the society that Joe had forced upon her, Joe retaliated by reminding her of all the good things he has given her and telling her that she should be proud to be called Mrs. Mayor. As far as Joe is concerned, Janie “wasn’t even appreciative of his efforts and she had plenty cause to be. Here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it” (Hurston 62). But Janie is beginning to realize that she has done what so many others have done before her regarding society. She has traded security for freedom, and the thought did not go down well. She wants more than the high chair of security and honor that has been forced upon her. She wants freedom. “Everybody can’t be lak you, Jody. Somebody is bound tuh want tuh laugh and play” (Hurston 62).

It was inevitable that Janie cannot live up to the expectations of the Mayor and society, and more importantly, it was inevitable that the Mayor and society could not live up to the expectations of Janie, who wanted a freedom that her husband and his society refused her. She came to understand this one day when Joe slapped her because of the food she had prepared for dinner was not up to expectations, and after slapping her and verbally abusing her, he stomped back to the store in order to take refuge inside his manmade society. While she stood in the kitchen, her ears ringing from the slap, Janie realized something important about herself and freedom. “She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurston 72). Janie has learned how to show one face to the world around her and her secret face to her inner self and the freedom for which she desired. She has begun to separate the reality of her restricted life in the society of the Eatonville store and the freedom of her dreams.

When Janie dichotomizes her life, so to speak, separating her dreams from her surroundings, something happens that damages her quest for personal freedom even more. She quits fighting, at least for a time, and without a willingness to fight for freedom, then freedom does not stand a chance. “The years took all the fight out of Janie’s face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave some. She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels” (Hurston 76). However, the important part of the quote is: “For a while she thought it was gone from her soul” (Hurston 76). But there was still a flicker of light in her soul, a glimmer that shown on the personal freedom of which she dreamed. As long as this spark still abided in her soul, she could prevail over the inhibiting factors of society. She begins to prevail the day “she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes” (Hurston 77). The glimmer of freedom in her soul is beginner to glow. Society has not completely defeated her. And soon after, freedom’s light begins to glow for Janie because she has the courage to fight for it. She snaps at Joe in front of the gathering of town folk: “Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it (emphasis added). Dat’s uh whole lot more’n you can say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (Hurston 79). This, of course, is the supreme insult to Joe and is a direct assault on the society in which he has created and the citizens of that society who have heard Janie’s remarks. This is the unmaking of Janie and Joe, but it is the beginning of Janie’s fight for her personal freedom.

As Joe is lying on his deathbed, he accuses Janie of having had no sympathy for him. Janie disagrees. She knows better. She knows her own heart. It isn’t that she had no sympathy for Joe; it’s that society (that which Joe represents) stole the freedom to be sympathetic. Janie tells Joe: “Naw, Jody, it wasn’t because Ah didn’t have no sympathy. Ah had uh lavish uh dat. Ah just didn’t never git no chance tuh use none of it. You wouldn’t let me” (Hurston 85). Even in death, Joe blames Janie. He is jealous of her longing to be independent and free.

With Joe’s death, Janie is ready, willing, and determined to have the personal freedom that had been denied her all her life. She makes a statement to herself the very night of Joe’s funereal. “Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist” (Hurston 89). Symbolically, Janie has taken a solid step in the direction of personal freedom. She has freed her hair from the confines of the head rags that Joe and society had bound to her head. Her hair now swings freely, as do Janie’s thoughts of the future.

Still, Janie’s personal freedom lacked something basic. It lacked love of another person, a person with whom she could share the freedom of her thoughts as well as her life, a person who would represent freedom to Janie. This person is introduced halfway through the novel in the character of Tea Cake. Only minutes after meeting him, the glow of Janie’s personal freedom wells inside her when Tea Cake invites her to play a game of checkers. “He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play” (Hurston 96).

Tea Cake becomes the representation of freedom for Janie. While an ethical and moral man, he is free from the rules of society. He shoots dice. He takes Janie fishing at night, digging worms by the light of the moon. He wants freedom, not things. He wants Janie, not her things. And Janie comes to believe this, to know this. The morning after her first night with Tea Cake and Tea Cake is not in the house, Janie feels the freedom that he has given her, and Tea Cake becomes freedom to her. “So much had been breathed out by the pores that Tea Cake still was there. She could feel him and almost see him bucking around the room in the upper air. After a long time of passive happiness, she got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind. That was the beginning of things” (Hurston 107). It is the beginning of Janie’s newfound personal freedom through Tea Cake.

Eatonville (the town, society), however, did not like the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake. The town folk recognized that Tea Cake represented freedom, but to them, Janie represented society. She was, after all, Mrs. Mayor Starks. The citizens of Eatonville could not understand why Janie was attracted to Tea Cake, but that is because the town’s personal freedom was overshadowed by the society it created. Gayle writes: “Freedom is a man named Tea Cake. Like Janie, he is an outsider and in the eyes of the townspeople a ne’er-do-well, who has no business becoming familiar with somebody like Janie Starks. Janie, however, is somebody like Tea Cake. His search for a life-style outside that prescribed by tradition is as determined as hers. His commitment to a life of chance, to living by the roll of the dice, to moving outside of conventional values, stirs the rebellious spirit in Janie, enables her to move completely outside the prescriptions of past mores” (Gayle 146). The town folk did not understand personal freedom, and Janie understands it for the first time with Tea Cake. Even Janie’s best friend, Phoeby, wants her to marry the funeral home owner from up in Sanford, but Janie has no intentions of marrying into the society of death again. She has found freedom, and she means to keep it. She proves this to society by going away with Tea Cake. He wants to be free and he wants Janie to be free. And freedom is far away from society. It is in the Everglades where, as Tea Cake tells Janie, “folks don’t do nothin’ . . . but make money and fun and foolishness. We must go dere” (Hurston 128). After he drifts off to sleep, Janie looks down on Tea Cake “and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (Hurston 128). Her personal freedom is released in the freedom of Tea Cake.

The Everglades are hard, but they are also beautiful. Everything grows bigger there, better there, and the ground is blacker there. Tea Cake is afraid that he has taken Janie from civilization, but Janie disagrees. She knows that it is hard in the Everglades, but the primitive freedom she has found is so much better than the inhibiting society of the store. She tells Tea Cake: “Ah naw, honey. Ah laks it. It’s mo’ nicer than settin’ round dese quarters all day. Clerkin’ in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but do our work and come home and love” (Hurston 133). Society was harder on her than working in the fields in the Everglades, because the store restricted her, confined her, and inhibited her personal freedom.

But personal freedom demands a price, and in Janie’s case, it demanded a high price. It demanded that she kill the one person in life who had presented personal freedom. In rescuing Janie from drowning, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog. A couple of weeks later he gets the sickness and goes out of his mind. No longer does he represent freedom, because freedom has abandoned his mind. He is now locked away in a sickness that he cannot escape, and Janie symbolically frees him by killing him. Barbara Christian writes: “Janie and Tea Cake’s love affair ends tragically for Janie must kill her crazed lover because he has been bitten by a rabid dog. But Janie does not see her life as tragic; she sees it as full and rich. It is essentially this message that she brings back to her community, that self-fulfillment rather than security and status is the gift of life” (Christian 59).

When Janie returns to Eatonville, she is still a free person. She wears overalls rather than a dress. And she certainly does not wear the rag on her head. The town folk gossip, wondering what happened, while suspecting and voicing the worst that could have happened – that Tea Cake ran off with her money. In “Perspectives on Gossip,” Dr. Felice Aull writes of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God: “Janie returns under unexpected circumstances and the whispering begins. Hurston presents gossip as divorced from individuals. With the phrase ‘Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song’ gossip is a product of group consciousness that persists of its own volition. Gossip is not attributable to single individuals” (Aull 1). However, it is more than gossip that Hurston attributes to the group. The group represents society, and it is a society that judges her. But Janie does not care what they think or what they talk about. She tells her best friend, Pheoby, the story and tells Pheoby that she can tell the others if she wants to, that it doesn’t matter. She tells Phoeby not to be mad at the others for their talk, because they are withered from not knowing freedom. “Now, Pheoby, don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ‘em ‘cause dey’s parched up from not knowing things. . . . It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there” (Hurston 192).

The novel ends with Janie back in Eatonville, but it is a changed Janie. She still possesses freedom, because she still possesses the memory of Tea Cake and his freedom, and she always will. “Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (Hurston 193).

Aull, Felice. “Perspectives on Gossip.” World Wide Web. May 2, 2000.