Their Eyes Were Watching God: An Epic Search Essay, Research Paper

Their Eyes Were Watching God: An Epic Search

In the novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston shows how

the lives of American women changed in the early 20th century. Zora Neale

Hurston creates a character in her own likeness in her masterpiece, Their Eyes

Were Watching God. By presenting Janie’s search for identity, from her

childbirth with Nanny to the death of Tea Cake, Hurston shows what a free

southern black women might have experienced in the early decades of the century.

To the racial ties that would affect Janie all the way through this life long

search.

Janie’s search for identity actually started long before she was born.

Because Janie’s search is her family’s search. Nanny and Janie’s mom gave Janie

a reason to search. They were always held back by their owners, and their owners

took advantage of them, and raped them. They raped them of their identity. Nanny

signifies to evade the realities of her life and the life of Janie. When Nanny

says, “Thank yuh, Massa Jesus,” she is illustrating that although she is no

longer a slave, the slave consciousness has caused her to view even her

relationship with the deity about slave and master. This makes Janie the leader

of her family’s search. However Nanny realized this, and when she saw that Janie

was old enough for love she had her married. This guaranteed that Janie would

not continue a loss of identity.

Even as a young girl, living in the materialistic world of her Nanny and

her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie chooses to listen to “the words of the

trees and the wind” (23-24). This is the first evidence of her searching beyond

her boring life. This then leads to her everyday life left empty, because she is

always looking farther than where she is at the time. So day by day she gets

more worked up into leaving Logan, and searching for love. When she leaves Logan

to run off with Joe, she thinks to herself, “Her old thoughts were going to come

in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (31).

Joe aims to be a big voice and that is why he comes to Eatonville,

Florida. He feels that he will have a better chance at being a big voice in an

all black town than in a white man’s town. The problem is that he has adopted

white man’s values and forces them upon the townspeople and, most notably, upon

his wife Janie. Hurston points out the irony of Joe’s dilemma: “Starks is able

to ’set himself up as lord, master, and proprietor’ everywhere in Eatonville,

and not just in his general store. His power in Eatonville approximates the

white man’s almost total institutional control of America” (27-28). This

relationship was just another setback in Janie’s epic search. Nevertheless, when

her marriage to Joe collapses, she again decides, “So new thoughts had to be

thought and new words said” (77).

After a long stretch of pointless and endless days in her search, Joe

dies. This is one of the greatest days in her search. By now Janie’s

relationship with Tea Cake was growing into her greatest love yet. When she

falls in love with Tea Cake, she tells her friend Pheoby, “He done taught me de

maiden language all over” (109). Her search seemed very close to a peaceful end.

However, it was far from over, Tea Cake became ill after being bitten by a rabid

dog, he feared that he had been conjured. He was suspicious that Janie wanted to

be free of him so that she could marry a lighter skinned man. In an attempt to

quell his fear, Janie said, “Maybe it wuz uh witch ridin’ yuh, honey. Ah’ll see

can’t Ah find some mustard seed whilst Ah’s out” (166).

Janie’s search for an identity for herself, free of the ideas she had

grown up with, ties into bigger issues, important for her race as a whole.

Nanny’s vision of Janie’s care free life on a porch somewhere is associated with

being white; somehow the other lives of women are made to be less honorable

along with their racial ties. Janie’s straight hair becomes tied up with

whiteness, and because of the society’s racial pecking order, her hair is a form

of power against which her first two husbands strive. It is only toward the end,

when Janie both lets her hair down and condemns Nanny’s vision, that Janie sheds

the same restrictions that continue to doom others to personal stagnation. In

one compelling novel, Hurston ties together the important issues facing her

generation without distracting from the tale of one woman’s struggle with them.