

“They All Leaned Over While She Talked”: Storytelling and Community in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract: This essay explores the intersections of class, and gender in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and explains how these oppressive structures work against Janie in her pursuit of truth and acceptance. By examining the social structures represented by each of Janie’s husbands, I argue that Janie’s dream becomes irreconcilable within her reality. Moreover, I suggest that her idealized dream becomes one that can only be achieved through storytelling, wherein Janie can form an empathetic metafictional community bond with an audience that might respond to and reciprocate her intense longing for acceptance.

The frame narrative within Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) reveals the constraints on Janie’s dream of self-actualization through reciprocity. Janie’s story centres around her relationships: her first with Logan Killicks, her second with Joe Starks, and her third with Tea Cake. The problems that arise with each of Janie’s husbands—who come to represent the oppressive structures of class, race, and gender—suggest that Janie’s dream is irreconcilable with her reality, as she cannot find the acceptance of community and self-fulfillment she desires through marriage. Her idealized dream becomes one that can only be achieved through storytelling, wherein Janie can imagine an audience that might respond to and reciprocate her intense longing for acceptance, in effect, forming a metafictional community with readers of the novel.

Janie's dream is awakened in her adolescence as she sits underneath a blossoming pear tree, watching the bees join with the leaf buds in "[love's] embrace" (Hurston 11). Janie describes this moment as the moment her "conscious life had commenced" (10). After Janie watches the bees interact with the pear blossoms, she decides that "this was a marriage!"—a physically ecstatic and reciprocal union between partners (11). Janie's desire for fulfillment (through reciprocity, sexual gratification, and community) becomes associated with this connection between the pear tree and the bees. In addition to the erotic imagery associated with Janie's burgeoning womanhood—the "snowy virginity of bloom" and the "creaming of every blossom"—there is a repeated need for intellectual discourse (10–11). Janie's young mind opens, and she feels bombarded by questions: "[W]here? When? How?" (11). She believes she finds the answer to these questions in the meaning of the word "marriage." Janie's awakening beneath the pear tree is the first instance wherein Janie's truth is associated with language and meaning. For young Janie, the abstract concept of marriage will import the true meaning of her dream: a sense of fulfillment symbolized by the union of the bees and the blossoms and an emerging need for intellectual discourse. However, Janie's desire for fulfillment in marriage turns to disillusion during her subsequent marriages.

Janie's husband Logan Killicks provides a critique of the social and economic hierarchy that constrains Janie's dream. Janie's marriage to Logan, as presented by Nanny, Janie's grandmother, is supposed to represent freedom from economic burden and protection from preying young men (Hurston 15). However, Nanny's vision of Janie's freedom conflicts with her own; Logan should bring Janie fulfillment, but he does not. Nanny dreams for Janie to be "sit-tin' on high" without having to worry about being used as a "work-ox and a brood sow"—free from physical and sexual labour (16). Janie accepts the union under the pretense that "she would love Logan after they were married," as marriage would "end [her] cosmic loneliness" (21). However, Janie's lack of physical interest in Logan quickly leaves her

disillusioned with marriage. Logan's financial stability does not bring Janie any fulfillment; this union inspires neither love nor community, and it does not answer her internal questions. Therefore, Janie becomes aware that marriage does not equate to love and does not fulfill her dream—she is confronted by the limitations of words as she realizes they do not coincide with their meaning. Although reconciled with the failures of language, Janie continues to search for acceptance and fulfillment, only now she realizes her dream exists outside of the bounds of traditional meaning. She yearns to express a “song forgotten in another existence and remembered again” (10). Janie begins to understand that her dream does not exist within the confines of her marriage and instead exists within her desire for storytelling and community, revealed in her marriage to Joe Starks.

Janie's second union, her marriage to Joe Starks, represents further constraints on her dream of acceptance within marriage. Joe's upper-middle-class status allows him to become “a big voice” within Eatonville, the coloured community he establishes (Hurston 28). Janie is drawn to Joe by his desire to foster community; but, despite her initial attraction, she is once more disillusioned as she realizes that Joe's ideal community depends on him acting as an authority figure rather than a member of the community. Joe's power within Eatonville further alienates Janie, as he often excludes her from public events, such as the burying of the mule and telling jokes on the porch of his store. Joe effectively denies Janie the ability to communicate and connect with the community through storytelling. This alienation from community storytelling is detrimental for Janie; as described in Amanda Bailey's article “Necessary Narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” narrative opportunities “open up new forms of knowledge and new connections between individuals to one another and to society at large” (321). Janie cannot engage in these forms of storytelling, so she is unable to connect with the Eatonville community and her husband. Furthermore, the socioeconomic hierarchy imposed by Joe's capitalist advancements constrains Janie's dream, as she feels the weight of class demarcation hinders

her ability to achieve community and personal fulfillment. The community no longer accepts Janie due to her proximity to Joe, as she “slept with authority” and was therefore implicated in his classist regime (Hurston 47). Alienated from her community, she is objectified and fetishized, which aggrandizes Joe and subjugates Janie within a specific gendered role. “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor” where she had resigned herself to exist as another symbol of Joe’s power (71). Hurston implies that economic division is antithetical to a sense of community, as it inhibits Janie from telling stories—barring her from her dream.

After Joe’s death, Janie experiences partial fulfillment of her dream with her next husband Tea Cake while working on the muck in the Everglades. Janie is openly accepted and is allowed to partake in the community: she can “listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to,” and she joins Tea Cake in hunting, fishing, and working (Hurston 134). Moreover, her union with Tea Cake is relatively devoid of rigid divisions of labour, unlike her previous marriages. However, the egalitarian illusion of the muck shatters upon the death of Tea Cake. When Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake after he is bitten by a rabid dog, her perceived community swiftly turns on her, calling for her execution. The men of the muck community take a staunchly gendered position against her, blaming her for Tea Cake’s death and believing she had “took up with another man” and left him (186). Moreover, the men associate Janie with the white audience of the courtroom, claiming, “Well, long as she don’t shoot no white man,” she could get away with killing anyone (189); meanwhile, the white women listen to Janie’s testimony: “they all [lean] over while she [talks]” and validate her innocence through their acceptance of her, while the muck community resents her (187). The trial represents the moment wherein Janie loses community acceptance. The egalitarian nature of the muck diverts along gendered lines; despite her previous imaginings of community, she is reduced to her identity as a woman—one who can be easily turned on and disposed of. Therefore, Janie’s dream

is not realized on the muck either. Desolated, she returns to Eatonville, exiled from a community she had once thought inclusive, to join a community where she knows she will not be accepted.

Janie's dream is only realized in her reflections on the past and telling her story to her friend Pheoby upon her return to Eatonville. Janie's narrative retelling provides her with a final opportunity to find community. Literary scholar Tim Peoples explains that "Janie develops through the act of self-expression; her emergence into self-actualization is contingent on narrative" (187). The novel's central framing device is Janie's retelling of her story to Pheoby in order to achieve community acceptance as Janie views storytelling as the only way to achieve community connection. As Janie describes, storytelling is an act of the "oldest human longing—self revelation" (Hurston 7). Janie's dream is, therefore, expressed through storytelling: she conveys her own lived experiences through narration to create a mutual bond between the reader and storyteller. According to Nicole M. Morris Johnson, Pheoby is the necessary vessel for Janie's narrative as she represents a "liminal figure—an accepted member of the Eatonville community" who allows Janie the "most favorable chance for receiving the understanding that she desires" (87). By the end of Janie's narrative, Pheoby states that "[she] done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh ... Janie," exemplifying the change that Janie inspired within her (Hurston 192). Moreover, Pheoby's reaction to Janie's story demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between the bees and the pear blossoms from Janie's first dream. Janie experiences catharsis by telling her story, while Pheoby benefits from hearing it. The reciprocity associated with Janie's storytelling enables her to achieve acceptance from her listener.

It is this metafictional connection between audience/reader and storyteller/author that the novel focuses on in its conclusion. This relationship arouses questions regarding the empathetic connection between these groups; namely, can readers be trusted with the task of relaying and identifying with Janie's story, despite having not lived

it themselves? Although Janie claims, “you got tuh go there tuh know there” (Hurston 192), the novel’s use of free indirect discourse creates the opportunity for readers to go there themselves—to form a bond and community with Janie. Bailey ponders Hurston’s use of free indirect discourse and the community it inspires: it allows readers to “consider a life beyond [their] own experience ... enough for [them] to feel that [they] are feeling with her,” which is, “after all ... what story-telling is all about” (326–27). Therefore, by using free indirect discourse, the novel facilitates an empathetic bond between author and reader. Janie “becomes a model for new ways of conceptualizing community” through storytelling and the “performance of personal narrative” (Morris Johnson 88). Pheoby, the reciprocator for Janie’s narrative and a vessel for the reader, has “in a sense, lived that life and experienced that knowledge in a real way, even without ‘going there’ herself” (Bailey 331). By the novel’s conclusion, Janie has found community in the promise of narrative retelling, rather than in Eatonville.

Their Eyes Were Watching God demonstrates the impact that stories have on their listeners and the possibilities of connection through storytelling. Janie forms an emphatic community bond through her narrative voice, releases the memories within her, and achieves her dream of mutual reciprocity: “the kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace” (Hurston 193). Janie’s dream of community reciprocity is only realized within her moments of reflection through the retelling of her story. Janie uses her story to import a sense of community with her audience. Throughout the novel, Janie finds her dream constrained by socioeconomic, gendered, and racial structures. It is only through storytelling that she can escape these structures and dare to achieve fulfillment through narration and empathetic community bonds. Janie ends the novel experiencing the promise of mutual reciprocity, a desire aroused by her initial dream, through narrative storytelling.

Works Cited

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