

Their Eyes Were Watching God: Black Feminism and White Ideals

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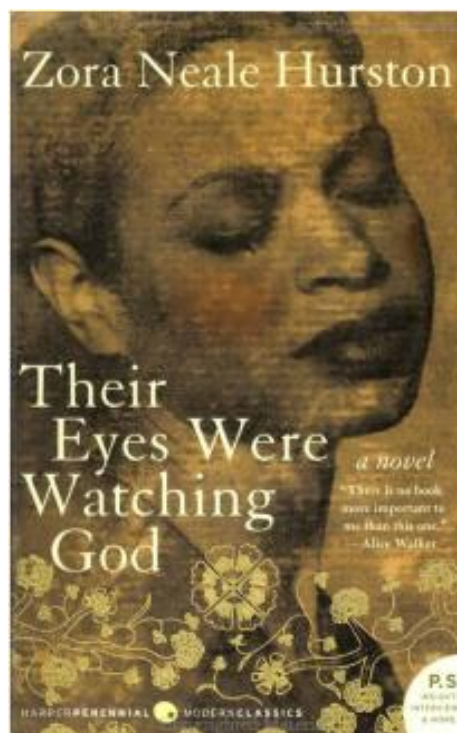
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Introduction

This paper will focus on Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The novel was written during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, which took place in the 1920s and 1930s and was centered in the neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. At the time of the Harlem Renaissance the movement was coined the New Negro Movement. The members of the movement specialized in different disciplines of art; the community consisted of writers, intellectuals, poets and musicians whose objective was to establish a new black identity, which was the New Negro. The main objective was to abolish stereotypes that were imposed on African-Americans, who were perceived as being hyper sexual, savage, violent and idle. The New Negro Movement was a response to the segregation of the blacks that had begun in 1876 when the Jim Crow laws were initiated. These laws prohibited the mixing of whites and blacks in public facilities, such as public schools, public transportation, restaurants and drinking fountains. The ideals of the Harlem Renaissance shine through in the novel mainly in the portrayal of a black female protagonist who is free to pursue her own identity without whites interfering in the process. (Reuben)

Their Eyes Were Watching God revolves around Janie Crawford, a young African-American woman who lives with her grandmother as her mother has been absent for as long as she can remember. Her grandmother has a traumatic past, having lived through slavery and being raped by her master several times. Her perception of freedom is to be wealthy and to be able to provide Janie with the carefree life she never had. Janie is forced to marry a wealthy farmer named Logan Killicks. However, this is a loveless marriage, Janie has to work hard on Killick's land, and she is often verbally abused by him. When the ambitious Joe Starks comes along, he charms Janie with his charisma and optimism. He is headed to Eatonville, Florida which is a town built and run entirely by black people.

They move to Eatonville where Joe opens a thriving grocery store and is later voted mayor of the town. All of a sudden Janie is an upper class woman and Joe pressures her not to associate with the locals and to refrain from lowering herself to their level. Joe wants to provide Janie with a carefree life, but in reality he suffocates her, which at a certain point results in her emotional and social isolation. However, Janie undertakes no action to confront him and only occasionally does she dare to contradict him, which evokes a violent response from him. Later on, Joe falls ill and Janie does everything in her power to help him but he does not want her help. Eventually Joe dies and Janie is a free woman with her own estate and money. Some time after Joe's death she meets Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. At first she is apprehensive because she is much older and she thinks that he is after her money but when it becomes clear that he loves her for who she is, they get married. The couple moves to Jacksonville and later on to the Everglades where they both go to work. Janie has to work hard but that does not matter to her as long as she is loved by her husband. A hurricane strikes the area and while saving Janie from drowning, Tea Cake is bitten by a mad dog and is infected with rabies. He becomes a different person and even attempts to kill Janie; in the fight that ensues she kills Tea Cake. A trial follows in which she is found innocent. She returns to Eatonville and is finally at peace.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is widely regarded as a feminist novel, as the character of Janie regains her independence after being oppressed by men. This paper will argue, however, that the novel cannot solely be regarded as a feminist novel as there are aspects that conflict with feminist theory. The novel struggles to combine feminist ideals of equality of men and women with traditional gender roles. This ambiguity of the novel is a much-discussed topic in scholarly discourse. William M. Ramsey claims that "critics read *Their Eyes* in dramatically different ways" (38). Furthermore, he claims that Janie's determination to be an independent woman contradicts her traditional ideas about men and

women in that she believes that it is a man's duty to provide the woman with a good living, and to love and protect her. The text, according to Ramsey, is "both a precursor to the modern feminist agenda yet also a reactionary tale embalming Hurston's tender passions for a very traditional male" (38). Ramsey hereby declares that Hurston did not manage to create a strong female character as she is very dependent on men. In addition, Jennifer Jordan claims in the article "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" that Janie is not able to function without a man by her side. The article claims that throughout the novel Janie "demonstrated no ability to survive alone" (113) and "never perceives herself as an independent, intrinsically fulfilled human being" (115). In my opinion this corresponds with Janie's passive nature as she aspires to be independent but she always ends up with a dominant man instead, hoping to provide her with a sense of self-definition. She is always longing for a man to take care of her, opposing the feminist ideals that made the novel famous in the first place. In concluding the article Jordan remains apprehensive about the feminist qualities of the novel and whether it really appeals to African-American women:

The novel fails to meet several of the criteria defined by black feminist criticism. Perhaps the acceptance and glorification of this novel as the bible of black women's liberation speak to the unconscious conflicts about emotional and financial dependence, sexual stereotyping, interracial hostilities, and class interests inherent within the black feminist movement. (115)

Jordan doubts whether Janie can be perceived as a heroine for contemporary black feminists as the novel lacks issues that black women have to deal with today. Janie for instance has financial stability, while many colored women live in poverty. This discrepancy between the novel and black feminist ideals corresponds with the claim of Richard Wright, a fellow Harlem Renaissance writer, who critiqued Hurston's novel for being white-oriented: "In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose

chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy.” (25) Not only is the novel written for a white audience, there are white characteristics in the characters as well. James R. Giles mentions that “the two characters that most clearly represent materialism or “prose” in the novel are black characters with imitation white values.” (52) Kubitschek, among others, doubts if the character of Janie could be considered as an archetype of a colored, emancipated woman. Considering that “very few critics, however, recognize in Janie the independence and strength of the archetypal quester. Rather, they diminish her, denying her an independent sphere of action and being.” (109)

Having briefly discussed the academic discourse concerning the topic of feminism in *Their Eyes*, I would argue that the novel is ambiguous in that it combines traditional gender roles with feminist ideas. Also, critics are unsure about Janie’s status as a role model, as many of her actions do not cohere with feminist theory, even though the novel is widely praised for its feminist characteristics. This paper will mainly focus on the aspects that do not match with feminist theory. In addition, the paper will expand in the directions of race, class and gender and will focus on aspects of black feminism and the Harlem Renaissance.

Moreover, the first section of this paper will focus on how *Their Eyes* is not a feminist novel, by examining Janie’s relationships, in which traditional gender roles and male dominance play an important role oppressing Janie. This section will set out how traditional gender roles undermine the feminist ideals for which the novel is praised. Also, this section will focus on equality in relationships. The second section will connect *Their Eyes* to the Harlem Renaissance and black feminist ideals of the time. The New Negro identity will be discussed, together with the importance of the ancestor in the novel as well in creating a new identity. Additionally, this section will discuss the position of colored women in a primarily white society and the struggles of black feminism. Lastly, this section will examine how the novel balances between feminism and blackness. Finally, the third section will consist of an

intersectional approach to the novel, examining how race, gender and class intersect and lead to the oppression of Janie and African-American women in general. Furthermore, this section will zoom in on 'white behavior' and black stereotypes, tracing back to colonial times. These stereotypes are evident in the male characters in the novel and lead to the oppression of Janie as well.

I.

Anti-Feminist Attitudes in *Their Eyes* - Explored Through Traditional Relationships

*“Somebody got to think for women and chillum
and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think
none theirselves.”(71)*

One of the main reasons the novel contradicts with feminist theory is the use of traditional gender roles. This traditional division of social and behavioral norms conflicts considerably with feminist ideals regarding equality for women. Despite the alleged feminist character of the novel, Janie’s marriages are defined by male dominance. During the course of three marriages, it seems as if Janie trades up in terms of recognition and equality, but that is not the case. The first and the second marriage, being filled with dominance and violence, make the third marriage seem like an equal one. However, in her marriage to Tea Cake she is tricked into believing that she is in an equal marriage because she is blind for Tea Cake’s degrading actions, thus making her unsuitable to be a feminist role model.

Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks is a loveless marriage marked by domestic violence and verbal abuse. Janie is seen as an object, a work-horse, and is forced to work on Killicks’ land. His only use for Janie is to have her produce an heir, which she does not. Intimidated by Killicks’ age and wealth, Janie does not dare to confront him with his behavior. It is not until Joe Starks provides her with a sense of security that she confronts Killicks with his oppressing demeanor. Shelly-Ann Ferguson in her article “Folkloric Men and Female Growth in Their Eyes Were Watching God” links the marriage to folk tales, in this particular case to the Millers Tale by Chaucer, revealing that “the problems with the Killicks’ marriage stem from Janie's fear of Logan's plow -that potent symbol of slavish female labor and oppression- and his inability to alleviate her cosmic loneliness” (187). The difference in age and power, combined with the communal memory of slavery, result in the failure of this marriage.

In contrast, Janie's marriage to Joe Starks seems to start off well. Joe promises Janie a life of wealth and equality in the town of Eatonville. As described by Ferguson: "[Jody] convinces Janie that he will make her his admired, envied, and respected wife. While she now understands better the role of money in people's lives, she becomes especially vulnerable to Jody's offer of status, perhaps because of her illegitimacy and the admonitions of her grandmother" (189). This combination of financial security and affection make Janie believe she is making the right choice, for herself as well as for her grandmother. She is attracted to Joe not only for his ambitions, but also for what he can offer her, promising her a life without having to work. This shows in the beginning of the relationship, when Joe tells her "a pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (29). At first this traditional division of roles seems sensible to Janie after having suffered on Killicks' farm. Soon after that, Janie becomes his trophy wife, giving Joe stature and she becomes an upper class woman in an instant. Joe forbids Janie to talk to the common people and she has to hide her hair under a head-rag (55) claiming it is only his to look at, again showcasing his possessive demeanor.

Joe's power mainly derives from masculine gender roles. His young, attractive and obedient wife boosts his eminence. Being able to subject her to his rule gives him prestige and respect from the other men in the community. The relationship between masculinity and power is described by William Ickes in "Traditional Gender Roles: Do They Make, and Then Break, our Relationships?":

In essence, the traditional feminine gender role is a social orientation that emphasizes closeness and solidarity, whereas the traditional masculine gender role is a social orientation that emphasizes power and status. [. . .] The masculine disposition is to attend to the status and power implications of a social exchange before considering its

implications for solidarity and closeness, whereas the feminine disposition is to do the reverse.” (76)

Ickes states that the traditional masculine gender roles contribute to Janie’s oppression, with which Joe further asserts his power, not only towards Janie but also to the other men of the village. Additionally, Joe dominates Janie by patronizing her from the moment he meets her, stating that she is “hardly old enough to be weaned” (28).

Traditional gender roles and male dominance can be linked to authoritarianism, which according to Lauren E. Duncan: “is related to holding negative attitudes toward feminism and feminists, devaluing women’s problem-solving skills and holding misogynist attitudes” (43). Joe does just that: he perceives Janie as unintelligent, solely because she is a woman. This attitude becomes apparent when Joe is appointed mayor of Eatonville and gives a speech. When Janie is asked to give a speech as well, Joe replies: “...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” (43). At this point of the novel, Janie realizes Joe only married her for her appearance. However, only a few moments after being humiliated publicly, she asks him to help her in the store, posing herself as the incapable woman he wants her to be, subjecting herself to his rule: “Oh Jody, Ah can’t do nothin’ wid no store lessen youse there” (43). The store at first serves as a means to dispel Janie’s boredom but later on in the novel it becomes a prison for her, isolating her from a normal social life, leaving Joe as the only person to socialize with. Joe further degrades her by claiming that she is not fit for any domestic chores and therefore she is not a good woman.

In her marriage to Tea Cake Woods, Janie realizes that she has missed love, equality and protection in her previous marriages. At first, she is apprehensive of Tea Cake, being worried that “he was hanging around to get in with her and strip her of all she had” (100).

However, Tea Cake boosts her self-confidence and makes her feel equal to him. He is willing to teach her how to play checkers, something Joe would never let her do, as she mentions to Tea Cake: “Jody useter tell me Ah never would learn. It wuz too heavy for mah brains” (96).

From a feminist perspective it could be said that at this point in the novel Janie is a free woman, enjoying financial stability and a supportive husband. However, she is blinded by her love for Tea Cake, or the man she wants him to be. Tea Cake charms Janie by treating her as a fragile, upper class lady without having the means to support this lifestyle. She is not forced to work, even though Tea Cake has to struggle hard to provide an income. She lets Tea Cake take care of her and she even allows him to patronize her, not showing any resistance nor taking any actions. In her eyes Tea Cake is protective of her, but in fact he is reestablishing his manhood by controlling her, diminishing her seriousness behaving as though she were a “lil girl wid her Easter dress on” (98).

Tea Cake seems to hold progressive beliefs when it comes to relationships. Of the three husbands, he is the only one who does not consciously treat women as the weaker kind and seems to try hard to establish an equal relationship between him and Janie. He teaches Janie how to shoot a rifle, which is considered a masculine activity. This contrasts with how men in the community of Eatonville think about Jane handling a knife: “[Uh woman and a knife] don’t b’long tuhgether” (78). Moreover, Janie is flattered by Tea Cake’s efforts to make her his equal. She is not even angry at him for taking all of her money and throwing a party with it, simply because he has never experienced the feeling of having so much money. Instead she finds his childish behavior endearing. This demonstrates the difference in backgrounds of the two characters and Janie’s blindness for Tea Cake’s negative character traits.

Other than Tea Cake, Eatonville does not hold a progressive attitude when it comes to gender roles. Women are kept at home, while the men work on their farms and socialize on the porch of the store. Men beat their wives after a frustrating day, once more securing their place as the dominant force in the relationship. The wife will stay with him through the beatings, as in the community of Eatonville a woman on her own is worth nothing. When Joe has passed away and Janie is a free woman again, men in the town urge her to remarry, as “uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing [. . .] Dey needs aid and assistance. God never meant ‘em tuh try tuh stand by theirself. You ain’t been used tuh knockin’ round and doin’ fuh yo’self, Mis’ Starks. You been well taken keer of, you needs a man” (90). This vision corresponds with Janie’s behavior as she seems to be helpless without a man and is oblivious to Tea Cake’s dominant behavior, who in spite of his attempts to make her his equal ultimately exhibits the same behavior as her previous husbands.

The result of traditional gender roles defining the relationships in the novel, is that feminist theory is undermined. The use of traditional gender roles contributes to the lack of feminist qualities of the novel, as the main character is oppressed by men during the course of the novel and undertakes no action. Her first marriage is a loveless marriage in which she has to work like a slave under the reign of her husband. The second marriage involves love and boosts her to upper class status in an instant. However, the love fades and she is no longer blind for her husband’s oppressing demeanor, she tries to confront him with his behavior but she proves not to be strong enough. Finally, in her third marriage she seems to find equality, but she falls madly in love with the person she wants him to be, not for the person who he really is. Therefore, she is blind for his patronizing behavior, which allows him to take more control of his wife without her even knowing it.

II.

The Vision of the New Negro in *Their Eyes*

“I remember the very day that I became colored.”

(Zora Neale Hurston 1652)

In essence, the main objective of the Harlem Renaissance was to establish a new black identity, as the identity of blacks had been determined by whites for decades. The white perception of black people was a stereotyped image of blacks, which labeled blacks as being idle, savage and only sufficient for labor. The Harlem Renaissance, or New Negro Movement, aimed to reestablish the black identity through writing and other disciplines of art, in which they “wanted to stress both their blackness and their “Americanism”” (Hutchinson 1). Moreover, there were artists that focused on the future of the negro, whereas other artists and intellectuals looked back at slavery to find the essence of blackness and sought to reestablish their black identity by connecting with their ancestral roots.

The notion of blackness played a major role in determining the New Negro identity. By acknowledging their blackness there was no need to pretend to be anything else. To find the essence of blackness it was key to break with the white ideals imposed on the black community. E. Patrick Johnson claims in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* that “blackness may be deployed as resistance in the face of white colonization. In these instances blackness is not only both pawn and consequence of performance but also an effacement of it” (9). Blackness, according to Johnson, is used as a weapon against white interference. This is also appears in *Their Eyes*, because Eatonville was founded as a protest against white oppression, as “white folks had all the sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (28). Furthermore, Johnson claims that this reasoning “has been a political

agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included” (3). By creating a solely black unity, their politics have the same discriminating character as the white politics they detest. In the novel one can see the exclusion of whites as there are hardly any white characters present. Moreover, when they do appear in the novel, whites are represented as cold and flat characters, which are in the upper class and have done wrong to blacks in the past. Hurston uses the black vernacular to express the notion of blackness, as stated by Klaus Benesch in “Oral Narrative and Literary Text: Afro-American Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”:

At first glance, it looks as if *Their Eyes* is the story of a woman’s resistance to male oppression and of her search for identity. If it were not for the abundant use of Black English, which in itself ties the text to a specific cultural background, *Their Eyes* might easily be taken for the story of a white woman and thus to refer to ubiquitous problems of human existence. (627-628)

Moreover, the notion of blackness saw the need for a group identity in which all blacks could find themselves. In *Their Eyes* this identity is established in Eatonville, the town which is described by Benesch as “a proud, self-governing, all-black village that felt no need for integration and, in fact, resisted it, so that Afro-American culture could thrive without interference” (627). The inhabitants of Eatonville have to overcome the obstacles that are inherent into governing a village themselves, instead of whites. Furthermore, in the novel blackness and identity are inextricably linked together. Also for Janie, who’s “search for identity turns out to be primarily a search for blackness, a coming to terms with the various forms of Afro-American folk and oral culture. In her teens Janie had to face the anxieties and demands of a grandmother whose attitudes toward life still reflected the experience of slavery” (Benesch 629). Janie’s search for identity is essentially acknowledging her blackness and her ancestry. This also becomes apparent when looking at the Harlem Renaissance, where

some artists and intellectuals chose to base the New Negro on the vision of the future, whereas others decided to look back into the times of slavery in order to find their roots. Toni Morrison in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” states that “these ancestors are not just parents, they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Morrison hereby remarking that the ancestor is an ominous power that can appear in any novel and in any form.

In *Their Eyes* Janie reconnects with her ancestral roots through Nanny, who has lived through slavery. In Nanny’s eyes Janie forms a bridge between slavery and freedom. By freeing Janie from the negative connotations of slavery that influence her life she will become free as well. Therefore, Nanny values financial security and status over love and forces Janie to marry Logan Killicks who will provide her with just that. For Nanny it is of major importance that Janie fulfills her dreams, something that she was never able to do due to the burden of slavery. Janie is the key to a free life for her, as Nanny mentions: “You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you from wishin’” (16). She is willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of Janie’s future, in order to erase her past in slavery: “Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn’t have to stay in the white folks’ yard and tuck yo’ head befo’ other chillum at school” (19). Nanny in the novel often refers to her life during slavery, providing Janie with information that will shape her during her marriages. Despite Nanny wanting Janie to marry, she warns Janie for men as well, as black females deemed to be the lowest in rank and male thought is that they should attain to that level and to be submissive to their husband: “white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick

it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). In short, Nanny serves as the wise ancestor providing Janie with insights to live a good life, in order to erase her memories to slavery.

Sandra Pouchet Paquet in her article "The Ancestor as Foundation in Their Eyes Were Watching God and Tar Baby" claims that the ancestor's role in literature is "as a barometer of cultural integrity in contemporary African-American literature" (499). Blackness in literature and therefore the ancestral roots in literature are perceived as being authentic to the black race. Writer Toni Morrison in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." states that novels have a quality of providing "social rules and explained behavior, identified outlaws, identified the people, habits and customs that one should approve of" (58). Unlike white literature, black literature is very much influenced by the ancestor, no matter the setting of the story, as Kimberlé Crenshaw states that "whether the character was in Harlem or Arkansas, the point was there, this timelessness was there, this person who represented this ancestor" (62). The ancestor is seemingly omnipresent and its values and wisdoms are imbedded in the story.

Moreover, for blacks going back to their roots also meant revisiting their slavery past, along with dealing with the negative connotations of enslavement. Even when not being related to slavery directly, slavery is embedded in the communal memory of African-Americans, as slavery has had a major impact on the black group as such. People are born into a discourse of communal memories. The group's communal memory becomes its common knowledge and gives it a sense of belonging and identity. Especially during times of hardship the communal memory serves as a means to let everyone feel included, especially during times of discrimination in the case of African-Americans. Zora Neale Hurston's experiences with identity and the communal memory are described in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me", wherein she describes how slavery has affected her: "Someone is always at my

elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. [...] The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization" (1652). Hurston here mentions that despite having detached herself from slavery she will always be associated with it.

Black feminists in the 1920s and 1930s, looked upon *Their Eyes* as a text with conflicting messages about identity and relationships, as Janie's identity seems to be solely based on her relationships with men, which conflicts with feminist theory. Jennifer Jordan states that "Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole" (108). Thus Hurston has created a character to whom many black women can relate, but women do not aspire to be her, as she takes no action to stop the oppressing behavior of her husbands. Also because of her passive nature, Janie chooses isolation and contemplation over solidarity and action. (108)

Furthermore, black women had to deal with issues of gender as well as racial discrimination. The discrimination issues were deemed more urgent than the issues of gender, which made the black feminist movement differ extremely from the white feminist movement, which only focus was to even out differences in gender.

Summarizing, the New Negro Movement strived for a new black identity, in which all the African-Americans could find themselves. Accepting blackness was key to create their own sphere and to stop whites from interfering in their lives. For the New Negro identity, contributors of the Harlem Renaissance looked forward but also back at the past, closely examining their slavery past and coming to terms with it. The New Negro identity indirectly

meant the need for a new female black identity. However, this proved to be very difficult as black feminism did not only have to deal with issues of gender but also with issues of race. Issues of race had to be tackled first, in order to survive in a predominantly white society. Through this perspective, feminist theory is deprived because the major issues of gender are not being solved. In the novel, Janie first has to come to terms with her ancestral past before she can fight the oppression of her husbands and the rest of the black community. This self-realization only comes to expression at the end of the novel when she finally comes to terms with her blackness.

III.

Intersectionality and Behavior in *Their Eyes*

"De ones de white man know is nice colored folks.

De ones he don't know is bad niggers."(172)

Their Eyes lends itself for an intersectional analysis as so many axis of gender, race and social status can be found throughout the novel. Intersectionality is a feminist sociological theory which was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. The theory proves to be relevant to investigate instances of intersection of gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and how these factors lead to women's oppression. Crenshaw captures the issues of black women with her theory, as her objective is:

to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (1244)

Crenshaw critiques black feminism for leaving many issues that black women face undiscussed, as the priority of black feminism lays with solving issues regarding racial discrimination rather than solving issues of sexism. Crenshaw claims in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" that black feminism uses a single-axis framework in its analysis which often results in a one-sided outcome. By applying intersectionality, the many factors of women's oppression can be made evident. The factors of gender, race and class have defined Janie's character throughout the novel and have all contributed to her oppression as a woman. This oppression is not only present physically through the characters of Logan, Joe and Tea

Cake, but even more by the implemented values imposed by a predominantly white society. Even more so, is that Janie is of mixed-race, meaning that she has both roots in the white and in the black world. By clearly distinguishing between race, gender and class, one instantly creates 'the other' which is not included in the group. Janie could be perceived as 'the other', being both white and black and belongs to both the lower class and the upper class.

As earlier discussed in section one, gender plays a major role in *Their Eyes*. Together with race and class, these are important determiners for African-American females in general. Intersectionality contributes to showing the differences within the standards of society and how these disadvantages lead to social inequality and oppression. Janie has many advantages over the average African-American woman, enjoying financial independence and being a fair skinned woman with Caucasian features to whom women from both black and white descent can relate to, as seen in the court scene where white women sympathize with her, not for her experience, but for her skin-color. "She didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such" (145). Here one sees that Janie identifies with her black identity over her white heritage. This because her father is a white rapist and her mother is the product of a white slave owner, she has a hard time embracing her white heritage as in her eyes the whites have done harm to her family. It was probably Hurston's intention to set a sharp contrast between the black and the white world to further undermine the white race, which is in line with the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. However, this does not mean that the black community is glorified in the novel, as black stereotypes are used in the male characters and the community of Eatonville is depicted as being very judgmental. Crenshaw further states that "an effort to develop an ideological explanation of gender domination in the Black community should proceed from an understanding of how crosscutting forces establish gender norms and how the conditions of Black subordination wholly frustrate access to these norms (155).

Class intersected with race, marks many issues in the novel. Janie's moves freely between both lower class and upper class, but Tea Cake seems to have problems with her upper class past. Tea Cake is intimidated by Janie's upper class past, assuming that Janie has issues with his lower class standing and savageness. When explaining to Janie why he did not bring her along to a gathering, he tells her: "Dem wuzn't no high mucky mucks. Dem wuz railroad hands and dey womenfolks. You ain't usetuh folks like dat and Ah wuz skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin' you 'mongst 'em" (124). Joe on the other hand, urges Janie to behave like a white upper class lady and wants her to adapt their values, which Janie finds a preposterous idea, but nonetheless follows Joe's directions.

Along with the notion of race come racial stereotypes which are very often employed in the novel. The stereotypes stem from colonial times and divide between the savage and the civilized. Octave Mannoni claims in *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* that "the savage, is identified in the unconscious with a certain image of the instincts. And civilized man is painfully divided between the desire to 'correct' the 'errors' of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in his search for some lost paradise..." (21). Racial stereotypes are the result of racial prejudice and "involves the presumption of certain attributes in an individual solely on the basis of racial groups" (Bromley 546). Moreover, there are presumptions and prejudices about race. The white race is considered to be the overriding race, due to "the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily engenders a tense relationship with its Others" (Johnson 4). Indirectly stating that equal relations between white and colored people are impossible. Again, it is claimed that the Negro should not "be a slave of his own archetype" (Mannoni 35). Creating an interaction between the historical importance of whiteness and the blacks subsiding to the role of the victim. Black stereotypes that are employed in the novel are savagery, gambling and domestic violence, which are made visible through the characters of Logan, Joe and Tea Cake. Instances of black stereotypes can

be found in the verbal abuse by Janie's husbands, but most stereotypes can be found in Tea Cake's character, who coming from a lower class with an unstable income is sometimes forced to make a living from stealing and gambling.

Not only black stereotypes employed in the novel, but white stereotypes as well. Be it that these are exhibited by black characters that embrace white values and norms and therefore are acting white. Logan Killicks establishes himself as Janie's master, revisiting colonization with Janie as his slave. He treats her badly and without respect, like a plantation owner once used to treat his slaves.

Probably the most white-oriented character in the novel is Joe Starks, who is spawning white ideas after he becomes mayor and elevates himself to upper class. After being oppressed by whites he projects their range of ideas on the people in the town, who he deems to be lower than him. Even more so, because he is more literate than the villagers and overrides them with his intellect. He takes up the role of the white colonizer who will educate the savage, as Mannoni claims this is part of the "unconscious belief that we can bring 'the advantages of civilization' to people who, we say, have simply remained 'closer to nature'" (23). He further asserts his domination of the village by building a house that makes the rest of the town look "like servants' quarters surrounding the big house" (47). He paints the house white like the houses of white aristocrats in the area. Symbolically, this mention of whiteness can be perceived as him bringing the light in the black world, which also is mentioned in the passage of placing the street lantern in Eatonville, "De first street lamp in uh colored town" (45).

The character of Tea Cake Woods has white-inspired values when it comes to his behavior towards Janie as he is very possessive of her. He acts as if Janie has a free choice of will, but behind the façade of kindness there is patronizing. This is again contradicts with feminist ideals. Patronizing her and makes her put up with every rampage he is in.

Concluding this section, the outcome of the concept of intersectionality applied to Janie's character is that oppression of black women is much more complex than the oppression of white women, as many factors are determining her exclusion from society. By sharply defining borders of race and gender, one instantly creates 'the other', who is not incorporated in the created subgroup. Janie could well be perceived as 'the other', as she is both white and black, although she chooses to identify herself with the black identity. She also has lower class experiences and ideals, while being an upper class woman. She moves freely between the lower class and upper class, but in the end she does not feel connected to either of them. Choosing to unite herself with black identity, her black heritage will always bring up connotations that come with the stereotypes of blackness and her class as she is striving to move up in class.

Conclusion

Concluding this paper, one has seen that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that touches upon many themes and issues during the time span of Janie's three marriages. Many of which are defining her standing as an African-American woman during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Although *Their Eyes* is widely regarded a feminist novel, the factors of gender, race and class have showcased in this paper that the novel cannot be perceived as such. In the first section, traditional gender roles and relationship have been examined in order to prove that Janie is not fit to be a feminist role model, simply because she lacks the active attitude to make an end to her oppression by men. Furthermore, traditional gender roles contribute to the lack of feminist qualities of the novel, when Janie is dominated by her third husband Tea Cake and is blind for his possessive attitude and she is not even questioning his behavior. He is taking more control of his wife without her even knowing it. Also, Janie's eagerness to climb up the social ladder makes her oblivious to her husband's oppressing demeanor.

In the second section the novel's relation to the Harlem Renaissance was investigated, along with black feminism during that period. The New Negro Movement strived for a new black identity, in which all the African-Americans could find themselves. The notion of blackness played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance to establish the New Negro identity. Their blackness had to be embraced in order to create their own culture and stop the whites from interfering in their lives. In order to found that identity, contributors of the New Negro Movement looked back at their slavery past. Although they were not involved in slavery directly, they did share the communal knowledge of their community and still experienced the negative connotations of slavery on a regular basis. The ancestor can also be found in the novel through the character of Nanny, who has lived through slavery and is helping Janie to come to terms with her black heritage, as well as burdening her with her own issues.

The New Negro identity indirectly meant the need for a new female black identity. However, this proved to be very difficult as black feminism did not only have to deal with issues of gender like white feminism. Additionally they had to cope with issues of racial discrimination. Issues of race had to be tackled first, in order to survive in a predominantly white society.

In the third section, intersectionality was used as a means to unveil the issues that African-American women face. By intersecting the factors of race, gender and class one can precisely examine the complex process of black women's oppression. Additionally, the characters conducted white behavior, resembling the white plantation owner and his oppressing behavior, which is taken out on Janie. Black stereotypes are also present in the novel and aid to enlarge the contrast between black and white characters in the novel, further diminishing the white race, as well as posing the woman as a helpless creature, which undermines feminist theory.

Returning to the statement posed in the introduction, namely that the novel is ambiguous in that it combines traditional gender roles with feminist ideas, *Their Eyes* has proved that although being regarded a feminist novel, it is indeed lacking feminist qualities. First of all, because of the traditional gender roles that allow the man to be dominant and the character of Janie who with her passive attitude is not taking any action to stop her husband's oppression. Furthermore, Janie is a very dependent woman, who is seemingly unable to function without a man by her side and therefore is staying in abusive relationships, afraid of being on her own and the reaction of the black community. In short, Zora Neale Hurston has created a seemingly feminist character, to which many black women can relate due to the recognizable issues that Janie faces in her marriages. But due to her passive nature, women do not aspire to be her, as she takes no action to make an end to the oppressing behavior of her husbands.

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