

**Theme of Nature vs Nurture
In
Their Eyes Were Watching God
(By Zora Neale Hurston)**

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores how the unpredictable forces of Nature shapes one's destiny. It illustrates how **fate** and external forces shape Janie's journey. Her pursuit of **true love** leads her through three marriages, each defining her growth and self-discovery. The **hurricane** serves as a powerful symbol of uncontrollable chaos, humbling characters like Tea Cake, who believes he can defy nature. Throughout the novel, Janie faces **antagonistic forces** in the form of societal norms, sexism, and racism, forcing her to endure rather than conquer. Her silence in earlier relationships represents submission, but with Tea Cake, it signifies strength and choice. Despite the pain of losing Tea Cake, she finds fulfillment, realizing that **personal independence** and experience define one's destiny. The novel ultimately conveys that life's journey is shaped by a balance of personal will and the unpredictable forces of nature, leading to Janie's self-actualization.

Keywords: Nature, fate, hurricane, antagonistic forces, personal independence, true love

In "Their Eyes were Watching God", Nature serves as both a metaphor and a plot device. It symbolizes Janie's emotional states and personal growth, with events like the blossoming pear tree representing her sexual awakening, and the Hurricane mirroring the chaos in her life. Nature's elements drive the plot and reflect Janie's internal journey

"Their eyes were watching God" can be considered to be a study of 'Nature vs Nurture'. It is the battle with the Hurricane that is the source of the book's title and highlights the conflict of the novel. Janie's quest to find her place in the world amid confusing, unpredictable and threatening forces. Throughout the novel we can see that the characters are under the delusion that they can control their environment and secure a place for themselves in this world. The novel demonstrates that destiny and chance overpower any individual choice that Janie makes. Her life is completely ruled by the things outside her control.

The novel traces Janie's life, initially her quest for true love and then her exploits in pursuit of this goal. She is robbed of her innocence in her early two marriages. But she gains her womanhood and maturity during this period. So her adulthood is defined by her suffering and using that wisdom to achieve her goal of life. Janie's continuous interactions and experiences

with nature prove its influential role in Janie's life throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Nature is Janie's pathway into womanhood and played a big role in starting her journey through life as a woman. Janie's experience with the pear tree provokes this shift from childhood to womanhood for Janie. "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom [...] the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. [...] Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (11). Janie's orgasm after watching the bee 'make love' to the tree illustrates the connection between her path into womanhood and her interaction.

Throughout the novel, Janie is confronted with antagonistic forces like Hurricane: Nany, Logon and Jody's doctrine Mrs. Turner's racism, the sexism of Eatonville's men. Janie could never defeat these forces, but bear them and try to survive them. When hurricane strikes, it is human against God, against Nature. It also shows that Nature's fury unites people against terrifying environment. We can see Jody's mindset in his attempts to be a demi-God. Tea-Cake also makes the same mistake. He is too proud to get threatened by the storm. But the storm is a force of pure destruction and chaos and it doesn't have a consciousness. It is cruel, unfair, random and devastating face of a confusing universe.

Protagonist Janie Crawford's ideal of contentment is shown in Hurston's imagery of a pear tree, which represents nature's beauty. The pear tree represents Janie's idealized views of nature, as it demonstrates her naive and romantic character which constantly seeks true love, and her idealism of the harmony in a marriage based upon love as she travels a path of self-discovery throughout the novel. "Oh, to be... a tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world" (14). Hurston deliberately describes the pear tree in this fashion to show the relation between a blossoming tree, which is blooming as it grows, to the significant character changes in Janie as she marries different men in an attempt to discover happiness in a loving marriage. As the bees interact with the tree's blossoms, she witnesses perfection in nature's simple beauty, which is captured in Hurston's imaginative description. This energy, passionate interaction, and blissful harmony are ideals Janie chases throughout the rest of the novel. As the protagonist sees harmony with nature, she ultimately seeks harmony within herself, as her final husband Tea Cake brings out true love that is deeply rooted in Janie's ideals of marriage.

The storm humbles all. Community and intimacy are humanity's refuge against threatening forces. Tea cake and Janie's relationship is reciprocal., each helps the other survive. Their bond gives the ultimate answer to Janie's spiritual quest. At one point in the novel, Jannie passively accepts the beating at Tea cake's hands. But this silence is not Janie's weakness, it is her strength. Right from the beginning she is trying to find her voice whether it was logon killicks or Jody but circumstances made her silent. With Jody, Janie's silence symbolizes Jody's dominance or Janie's passivity. It was not her choice not to speak. But with Tea cake Janie's silence is not her weakness rather her strength, her strength in controlling her new found voice. Now she chooses when to speak or when not to speak. Her new found voice has enabled her develop a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual respect. This strong union helped her to face the hurricane boldly and survive it.

Throughout the novel, it seems to us that individual free will doesn't matter, only Fate and God's will matters. Right from the beginning Janie chooses a path for herself but has to leave that. To go with her will is Janie's choice but to leave that is God's will. She doesn't want to marry Logon but has to surrender to Fate. She elopes with Jody listening to her will but again she is not satisfied. With Tea Cake she is living the life merrily but fate still has its role to play. Again she has to surrender to God's will and has to kill her own husband whom she loves the most. When Janie and Tea-Cake are struck in the Hurricane, they don't know what to do, so they look to God as he only knows what will happen to them. So we can see throughout the novel, it is NATURE which is spinning the whole story. Janie herself is a strong woman but Nature has its own course. Her individual will are somewhere regulated or directed by Natural forces.

The title could mean that the book is all about personal and racial independence and is not about following what others tell you. But instead following God Janie seems to follow this. She rejects all the notions that tell what she should do in her life.

Not only the Hurricane is there physically but also there are forces, beliefs of antagonism that act like hurricane in the lives of the characters. Antagonism is not presented in particular person rather it is manifested in harmful system of beliefs. As we see that, Nanny was the victim of slavery and Janie, in turn was the victim of the mindset of Nanny. So we can see various forces such as cultural forces, environmental forces and circumstances which are sources of pain as the Hurricane is.

There is a hurricane of Passion also. Tea-Cake becomes a personification of all what Janie wants; her dreams become one with Tea-Cake. Tea-Cake arouse the Hurricane of passion in Janie and strokes this desire by maintaining his distance from her. Tea-Cake manipulates his absence to make Janie love him more. No doubt some manifestations of Tea-Cake's character like partying and gambling adds to its attractiveness.

Then the Hurricane strikes and created chaos and danger. After the physical storm, an emotional storm is yet to come in Janie's life. Janie's story involving Tea-Cake follows the 'Voyage and Return' plot format. As most of the 'Voyage and Return' plots generally involve a thrilling escape, there is no such thrilling escape in 'Their Eyes were Watching God'. It is a transition from a happy, blissful married life to widowhood. When Tea-Cake aims a gun at Janie and Janie is forced to kill her own husband, it was not a thrilling escape rather a painful act. Disaster in the form of Hurricane strikes their lives and Tea-Cake's decision before and after the Hurricane condemn him to death.

The devastating aspects of nature in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are shown through the hurricane, as natural disasters depict Mother Nature's most destructive elements. Hurston personifies hurricane, by comparing it to a monster that "had left its bed." As Lake Okechobee breaks through the dikes with two hundred mile per hour winds, the author describes the monster with, "he seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers"(189). To describe the further devastation, the sea is described as

"walking the earth with a heavy heel." The imagery gives a haunting description of how nature, often thought of as peaceful, can also cause immense devastation. Hurston's colourful imagery of the Hurricane greatly enhances the characters' perception of God, the creator of the world. The storm that ultimately determines the direction of the novel includes the first appearance of the title as Tea-cake, Janie and Motor boat look up to the black sky and their eyes question God. Hurston writes 'night was striding across nothingness with the whole world in his hands' The imagery in this scene personifies nature and storm and at the same time draws focus to the title as they look up to the sky. The Hurricane causes the characters to see God's power through Nature and ultimately to surrender to forces beyond their control.

Hurston makes several references to Janie and Tea Cake's eyes, which are focused on God. As the two stand in awe of the storm, the author writes "they seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (187). In following passages, the book reads, "their eyes were questioning God" (186), showing the perplexity of the characters in God's plan for them as powerless human beings. It is interesting that two Christians question all that they know about God's universal love and protection through a single event, as they realize that nature's power far surpasses their own.

The destructive side of nature brings about dark imagery that decides the novel's conclusion. Chaos resulting from the hurricane brings about nature's dark side as Tea Cake gets bitten by a rabid dog in an attempt to save Janie from drowning. The image of darkness is used to show fierceness and the destructive side of nature, contrasting previous descriptions of nature's divine beauty in the pear tree. To depict darkness in the scene with the dog, the novel reads, "the dog stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge" (194). Janie tells Tea Cake later on, "Ah don't speck you seen his eyes lak Ah did. He didn't aim tuh jus' bite me... he aimed tuh kill me... Ah'm never tuh fught dem eyes lof pure hate"

Despite the fact that Janie herself killed her husband Tea-Cake, he still lives on in Janie's heart and memory. Janie has completed her journey of finding herself, finding true love and experiencing love. Now she is content having lived a fulfilling life and having acquired the wisdom one acquires after experiencing the life. Tea-Cake helps Janie realize who she is as a person through his unconditional love for her; he is her horizon. As Janie tells Phoeby that she is content having already lived her dream, she has been to "the horizon and back"

Death has been presented as both the traditional ending of life and cause for grief. However it also has a positive connotation; death is not merely an end, but the start of a new beginning. Death is often paired with an experience of rebirth. The novel also views death as a spiritual context, presenting the dying moment as a time of divine judgement

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