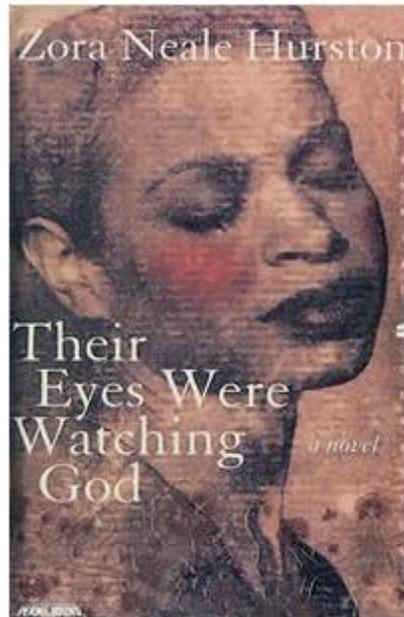


Teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

An Online Professional Development Seminar



Heather D. Russell

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from the National Humanities Center

FROM THE FORUM

- In what ways is Hurston's writing unique, and in what ways is it similar to that of other writers of her day?
- Can *Their Eyes Were Watching God* be considered a protest novel?
- Can you offer advice on how to handle the novel's dialect passages with students?
- Did Hurston's work as an anthropologist influence the writing of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?



Heather Russell

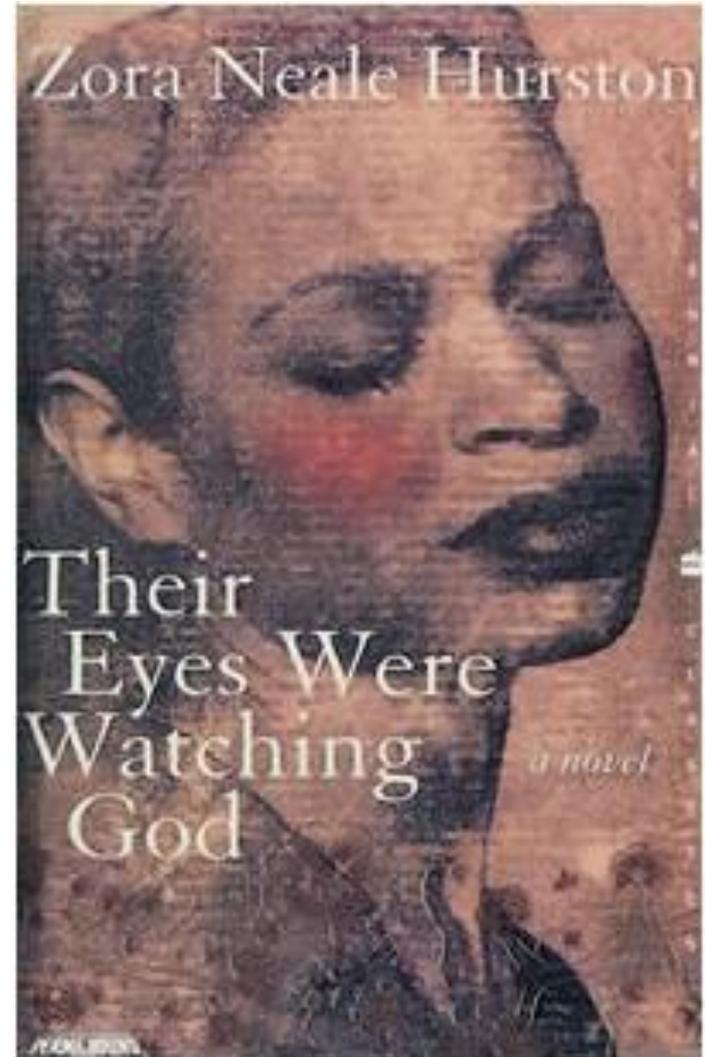
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in collaboration with the
Florida Humanities Council.

Introduction

In a letter to her friend William Stanley Hoole, in 1936, the African American Floridian folklorist and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston writes, “My next book is to be a novel about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched upon a flag-pole by the men who loved her and forced to sit there. At forty she got her chance at mud. Mud, lush and fecund with a buck Negro called Teacake. He took her down into the Everglades where people worked and sweated and loved and died violently, where no such thing as flag-poles for women existed.”



Introduction

Since its paperback re-issue in 1978, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), written in seven weeks, while Hurston was in Haiti doing research on African religious retentions, has continued to capture the imaginations of its readers, drawing them deeply into the erotic-spiritual “great journey to the horizon,” of the novel’s heroine, Janie Crawford, as she marries three husbands, becomes the mayor’s wife of the historic Eatonville, the first black town to be incorporated in the United States, traverses the Everglades, survives a hurricane, shoots the love of her life, her third husband, for which she is arrested and acquitted, and returns to Eatonville to tell the story to her best friend Phoeby.

General Discussion Questions

- But what is the novel really about?
- Is it simply about a woman’s search for romantic love? Or are questions of culture, race, gender, and ethnography also important in our re-reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?

“Characteristics of Negro Expression”

“What killed this man?”

The chorus answered, “Bare, bare fat.”

“What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.”

“What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.”

“Who’ ll stand his funeral?”

“We!!!!!!”

“Well, all right now.”

So he picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on. The yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in the spirit of adventure.

(Chapter 6, Page 62)

Discussion Questions

- How does the Eatonville community becomes a central character in the novel?
- In this mule burial scene how do we see Hurston as anthropologist, folklorist and ethnographer at work?

Joe Clarke's Store Porch as Ritual Space

Joseph C. Clarke

- Businessman
- Founder of the first all black town, Eatonville, Florida
- Model for the character Joe Starks



The Speakerly Text:

But sometimes Sam Watson and Lige Moss forced a belly laugh out of Joe himself with their eternal arguments. It never ended because there was no end to reach. It was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason.

Maybe Sam would be sitting on the porch when Lige walked up. If nobody was there to speak of, nothing happened. But if the town was there like on Saturday night, Lige would come up with a very grave air.

“And then agin, Lige, Ah’m gointuh tell yuh. Ah’m gointuh run dis conversation from uh gnat heel to uh lice. It’s nature dat keeps uh man off of uh red-hot stove.”

“Uuh huuh! Ah knowed you would going tuh crawl up in dat holler! But Ah aims tuh smoke yuh right out. ‘Tain’t no nature at all, it’s caution, Sam.”

“‘Tain’t no sich uh thing! Nature tells yuh not tuh fool wid no red-hot stove, and you don’t do it neither.”

“Listen, Sam, if it was nature, nobody wouldn’t have tuh look out for babies touchin’ stoves, would they? ‘Cause dey just naturally wouldn’t touch it. But dey sho will. So it’s caution.”

(Chapter 6, Page 63-64)

“Naw it ain’t, it’s nature, cause nature makes caution. It’s de strongest thing dat God ever made, now. Fact is it’s de onliest thing God ever made. He made nature and nature made everything else.”

“Naw nature didn’t neither. A whole heap of things ain’t even been made yit.”

“Tell me somethin’ you know of dat nature ain’t made.”

“She ain’t made it so you kin ride uh butt-headed cow and hold on tuh de horns.”

“Yeah, but dat ain’t yo’ point.”

“Yeah it is too.”

“Naw it ain’t neither.”

“Well what is mah point?”

“You ain’t got none, so far.” “Yeah he is too,” Walter cut in. “De red-hot stove is his point.”

“He know mighty much, but he ain’t proved it yit.”

“Sam, Ah say it’s caution, not nature dat keeps folks off uh red-hot stove.”

(Chapter 6, Page 65)

“How is de son gointuh be before his paw? Nature is de first of everything. Ever since self was self, nature been keepin’ folks off of red-hot stoves. Dat caution you talkin’ ’bout ain’ t nothin’ but uh humbug. He’ s uh inseck dat nothin’ he got belongs to him. He got eyes, lak somethin’ else; wings lak somethin’ else—everything! Even his hum is de sound of somebody else.”

“Man, whut you talkin’ ’bout? Caution is de greatest thing in de world. If it wasn’ t for caution—”

“Show me somethin’ dat caution ever made! Look whut nature took and done. Nature got so high in uh black hen she got tuh lay uh white egg. Now you tell me, how come, whut got intuh man dat he got tuh have hair round his mouth? Nature!”

“Dat ain’ t—”

(Chapter 6, Page 65)

Discussion Questions:

- What are Sam and Lige really arguing about here?
- Why does Hurston include this verbal exchange?
- What are society’s predominant stereotypes about blacks, in particular black working class people at this time?
- What is the significance of this verbal exchange in relation to American society’s ideas about race?

A Pure Negro Town...



A Pure Negro Town



“Ladies and gent’ men, we’ se come tuhgether and gethered heah tuh welcome tuh our midst one who has seen fit tuh cast in his lot amongst us. He didn’ t just come hisself neither. He have seen fit tuh bring his, er, er, de light uh his home, dat is his wife amongst us also. She couldn’ t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England. It’ s uh pledger fuh her tuh be heah amongst us. Brother Starks, we welcomes you and all dat you have seen fit tuh bring amongst us —yo’ belov-ed wife, yo’ store, yo’ land—” A big-mouthed burst of laughter cut him short.

“Dat’ ll do, Tony,” Lige Moss yelled out. “Mist’ Starks is uh smart man, we’ se all willin’ tuh acknowledge tuh dat, but de day he comes waggin’ down de road wid two hund’ ed acres uf land over his shoulder, Ah wants tuh be dere tuh see it.”

Another big blow-out of a laugh. Tony was a little peeved at having the one speech of his lifetime ruined like that.

“All y’ all know whut wuz meant. Ah don’ t see how come—”

“ ’ Cause you jump up tuh make speeches and don’ t know how,” Lige said.

“Ah wuz speakin’ jus’ all right befo’ you stuck yo’ bill in.”

(Chapter 5, Page 40-41)

“Naw, you wuzn’ t, Tony. Youse way outa jurisdiction. You can’ t welcome uh man and his wife ’ thout you make comparison about Isaac and Rebecca at de well, else it don’ t show de love between ’ em if you don’ t.”

Everybody agreed that that was right. It was sort of pitiful for Tony not to know he couldn’ t make a speech without saying that.

(Chapter 5, Page 41)

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways is the Eatonville setting important? In other words, how is Eatonville also a central character in the novel, and how might an understanding of Hurston’ s anthropological training help us to re-see the townspeople of Eatonville?
- Why do the townspeople interrupt Tony’ s speech and erupt into collective laughter?
- What social faux pas has Tony Taylor committed?
- What does the collective laughter suggest? How might Tony’ s omission moment be seen a doubly ironic?

1928: The Forgotten Hurricane



The Forgotten Hurricane

Tea Cake found that he was part of a small army that had been pressed into service to clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead. Bodies had to be searched out, carried to certain gathering places and buried. Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage.

(Chapter 19, Page 170)

The Forgotten Hurricane

“Got orders from headquarters. They makin’ coffins fuh all de white folks. ‘Tain’ t nothin’ but cheap pine, but dat’ s better’ n nothin’ . Don’ t dump no white folks in de hole jus’ so.”

“Whut tuh do ‘bout de colored folks? Got boxes fuh dem too?”

“Nope. They cain’ t find enough of ‘em tuh go ‘round. Jus’ sprinkle plenty quick-lime over ‘em and cover ‘em up.”

“Shucks! Nobody can’ t tell nothin’ ‘bout some uh dese bodies de shape dey’ s in. Can’ t tell whether dey’ s white or black.”

(Chapter 19, Page 171)

Discussion Questions:

- Often accused of being a social conservative on race, how does the novel’ s treatment of race, color and class challenge such allegations?
- In particular, why does Hurston choose to immortalize the Hurricane of 1928 for the dramatic action of the novel?

“I am Not Tragically Colored...”

“So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’ t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’ s where Ah wuz s’ posed to be, but Ah couldn’ t recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, ‘where is me? Ah don’ t see me.’

“Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chillun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, ‘Dat’ s you, Alphabet, don’ t you know yo’ ownself?’

“Dey all useter call me Alphabet ’ cause so many people had done named me different names. Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said:

“ ‘Aw, aw! Ah’ m colored!’

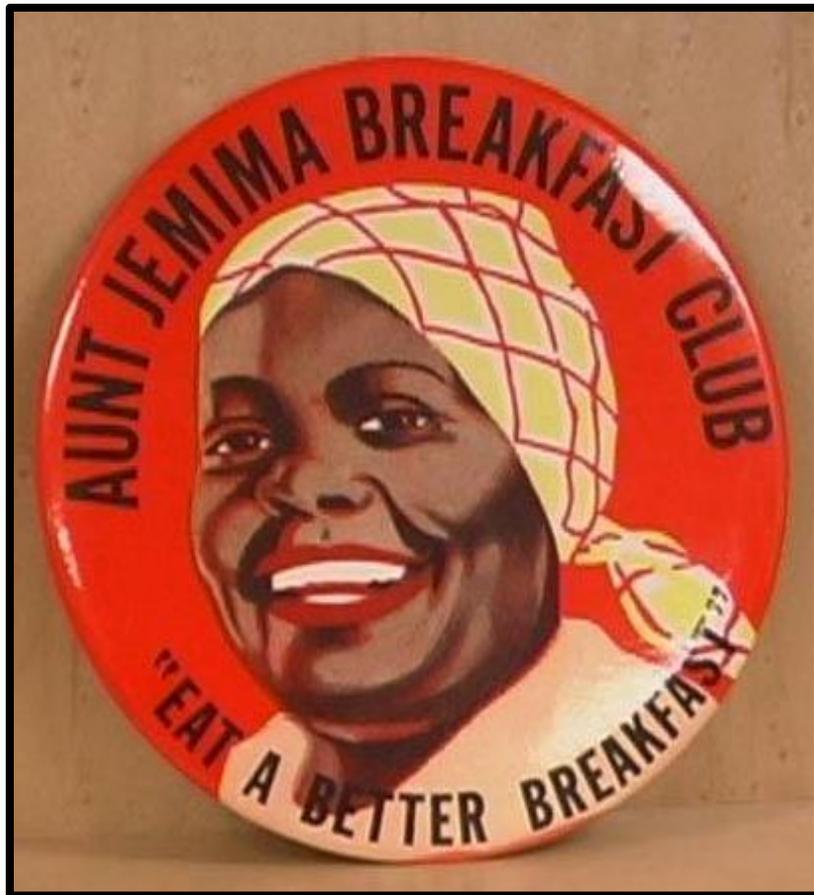
“Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.

(Chapter 2, Page 9)

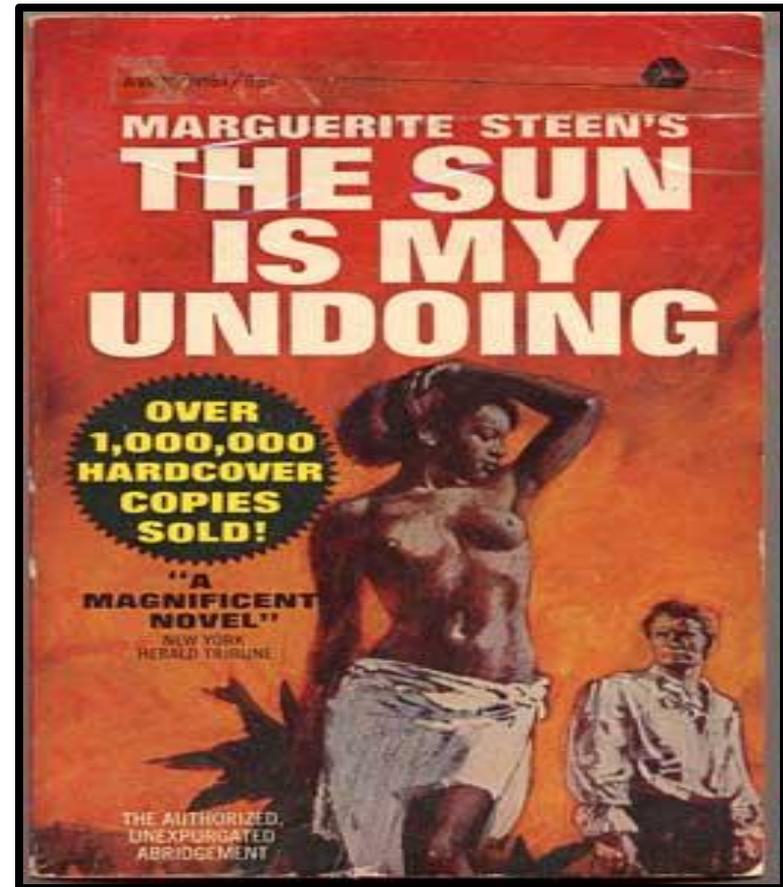
Discussion Questions:

- How does Janie react to discovering she is black?
- How does this narrative instance compare to other depictions of racial discovery in the novels of “passing” which predominated this time period?
- If “the race question” is not the central preoccupation of the novel, what is?

Mammy



Jezebel



“The Uses of the Erotic...”

She thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate. On a late afternoon Nanny had called her to come inside the house because she had spied Janie letting Johnny Taylor kiss her over the gatepost.

It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.

(Chapter 2, Page 10)

“The Uses of the Erotic...”

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.

(Chapter 2, Page 11)

Discussion Questions:

- What did it mean for a black woman character in the 1930's to be a sexual being?
- What is the significance of this narrative instance in terms of the quest motif of the novel?
- Why might it be important that Janie's coming-of-age experience is auto-orgasmic?
- What is her signal misreading of this moment?

- Yoruba (and other West African religions) and Catholicism are more easily blended
- Syncretic relationship between religions produces New World African Religions: “Hoodoo,” Vodou, Candomble, Santeria, Kumina/Pocomania (Myal and Obeah)
- West African gods have human attributes including sexuality – there is no division between the sacred and secular.

Where is Haiti in the novel?

Hurston won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1936 to study indigenous religious practices and their West African retentions in Jamaica and Haiti.



- The Lwa (also spelled loa) are the spirits of Haitian Vodou.
- They are intermediaries between Bondye —the Creator, who is removed from the world—and humanity.
- Unlike saints or angels however, they are not simply prayed to, they are served, and give special protection to specific groups.
- Like saints, the Lwa have specific colors associated with them and there are specific kinds of gifts which are preferable when humans are entreating them to be intercessors.

Vodoun

Legba: crossroads, red and black

Damballah, snakes, white

Ogun, metal, machete, rum, tobacco

Agwe, sea, fisherman, handsome

Erzulie, love, beauty, mother

Catholicism

St. Peter: always mentioned first; St. Anthony: looks like

Moses: deliverer; St. Patrick: Irish saint invoked against snakes

St. James, patron saint of laborers

St. Raphael, patron saint of lovers or engaged

The Virgin Mary, the holy mother, the intercessory, compassionate

Where's Haiti in *Their Eyes*?

“Come to yo’ Grandma, honey. Set in her lap lak yo’ use tuh. Yo’ Nanny wouldn’t harm a hair uh yo’ head. She don’t want nobody else to do it neither if she kin help it. Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de 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. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!”

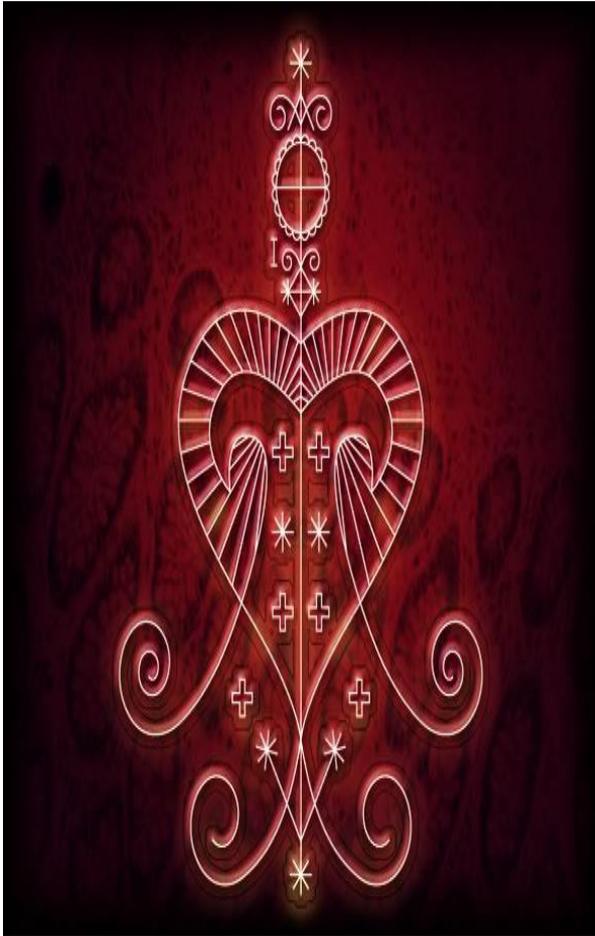
(Chapter 2, Page 14)

Discussion Questions:

- How can it be that Hurston writes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks while in Haiti and there is not mention of the island-nation?
- Where is Haiti mentioned in the above passage?
- How does the fact that we know she was studying African religious retentions during her Guggenheim-funded Haiti and Jamaica trips give us some insights into how we might re-read the novel using a different epistemological model?

ERZULIE: Haitian Lwa of Love:

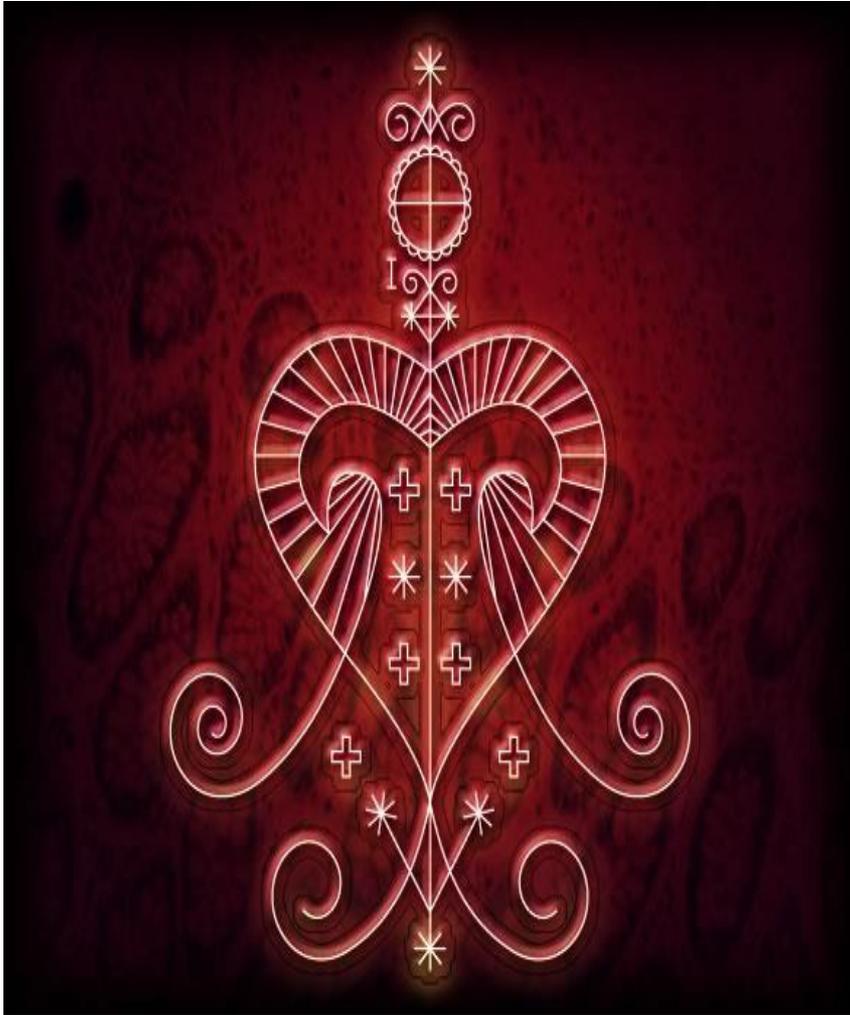
ERZULIE VEVE



ZORA BEATING MAMA DRUM

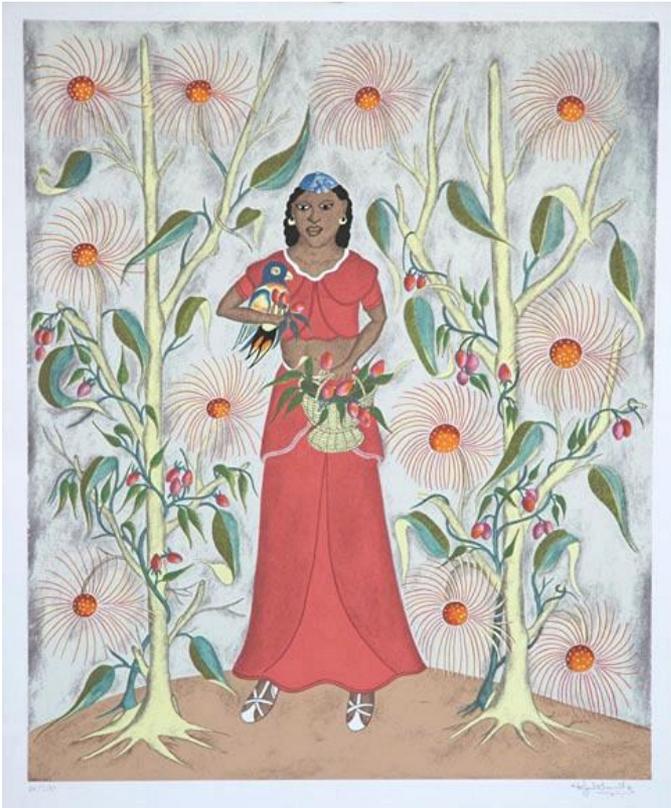


Erzulie has at least three different “names”



1. Erzulie Freda: mulatto, lady of luxury and love
2. Erzulie Dantor: black woman of passion, heart pierced with dagger connected to water
3. Erzulie ge-Rouge: red-eyed militant of fury and rage

Erzulie has three husbands.



1. Damballah, snakes, white (syncretized with Moses the deliverer)
2. Ogun, metal, machete, rum, tobacco (syncretized with St. James - laborers)
3. Agwe, sea, fisherman, handsome (syncretized with St. Raphael – lovers)

Daphne Lamothe's "Vodou Imagery, African American Tradition and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." In *Their Eyes Were Watching God, A Casebook*. Ed Cheryl Wall. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

Donna Aza Weir-Soley. *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* . Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009.

Re-reading *Their Eyes*

So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. **But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly.** Her breath was gusty and short. She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, "Ah hope you fall on soft ground," because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed. She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. **The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off.** She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman.

(Chapter 3, Page 25)

Discussion Question

- What is the significance of the image of the gate?

Re-reading Janie's Husbands



1. Damballah, snakes, white (syncretized with Moses the deliverer)
2. Ogun, metal, machete, rum, tobacco (syncretized with St. James - laborers)
3. Agwe, sea, fisherman, handsome (syncretized with St. Raphael – lovers)

Discussion Question

- Where can we see parallels with Janie's husbands?

Re-reading Symbolism:

Looking like some young girl, always in blue because Tea Cake told her to wear it. Poor Joe Starks. Bet he turns over in his grave every day. Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando.

(Chapter 12, Page 110)

Discussion Question:

- How does this short passage help to support our reading of Janie as Erzulie, and Tea Cake as Agwe?

“Alphabet...”

“So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’ t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’ s where Ah wuz s’ posed to be, but Ah couldn’ t recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, ‘where is me? Ah don’ t see me.’

“Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chillun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, ‘Dat’ s you, Alphabet, don’ t you know yo’ ownself?’

“**Dey all useter call me Alphabet ’ cause so many people had done named me different names.** Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said:

“‘Aw, aw! Ah’ m colored!’

“Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.

(Chapter 2, Page 9)

Discussion Questions:

- How does our reading of Janie as Erzulie in all of her manifestations work? In other words, how does she function as Erzulie Freda: mulatto, lady of luxury and love; Erzulie Dantor: black woman of passion, heart pierced with dagger connected to water and as Erzulie ge-Rouge: red-eyed militant of fury and rage?

The Hurricane: Cosmic Imbalance...

Didn't take them long to put right, however. Still and all, jealousies arose now and then on both sides. When Mrs. Turner's brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss.

“Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it. Ah wouldn't be knockin' her around. Ah didn't wants whup her last night, but ol' Mis' Turner done sent for her brother tuh come tuh bait Janie in and take her way from me. Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman tell mah wife Ah'm too black fuh her. She don't see how Janie can stand me.”

(Chapter 17, Page 147-148)

Discussion Questions:

- What issues fuel Tea Cake's insecurities?
- What are the consequences of those insecurities?

And then again Him-with-the-square-toes had gone back to his house. He stood once more and again in his high flat house with-out sides to it and without a roof with his soulless sword standing upright in his hand. His pale white horse had galloped over waters, and thundered over land. The time of dying was over. It was time to bury the dead.

(Chapter 19, Page 168)

Discussion Questions:

- How and why do Janie and Tea Cake end up outdoors in the midst of the hurricane, resulting in the rabid dog biting Tea Cake and Janie killing him in self-defense?

“Mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf...”

“If they wants to see and know, why they don’t come kiss and be kissed? Ah could then sit down and tell ’em things. Ah been a delegate to de big ’ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin’ is just where Ah been dis year and a half y’all ain’t seen me.”

“Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ ’em nothin’, Pheoby. ’Tain’t worth de trouble. You can tell ’em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ’cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf.”

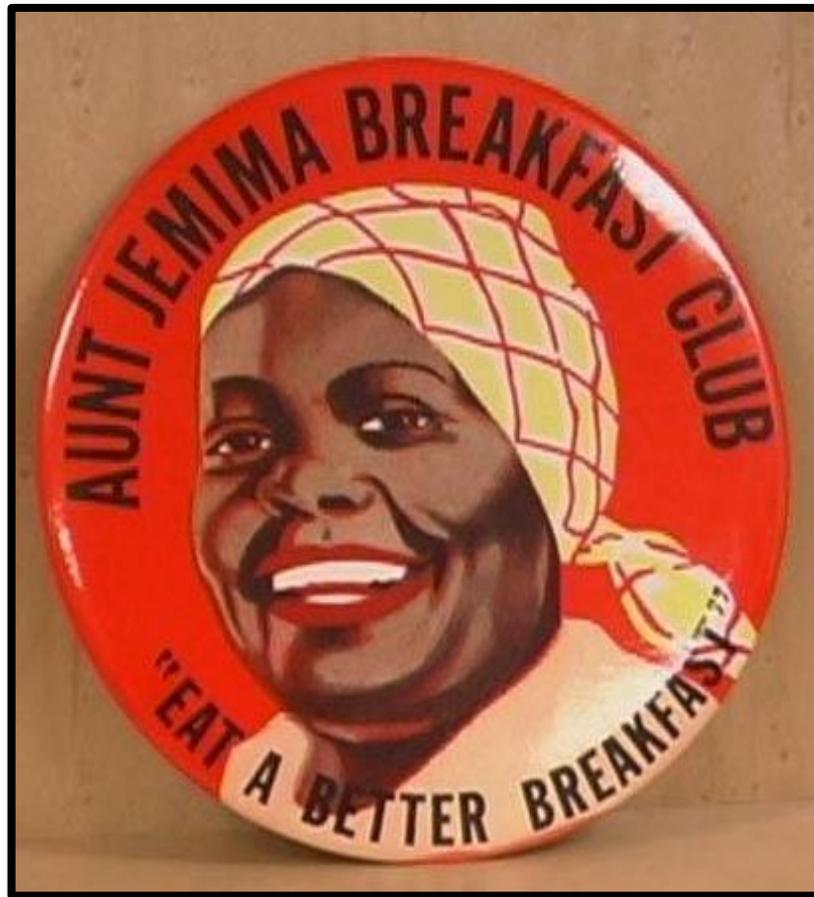
“Pheoby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint.”

(Chapter 1, Page 6-7)

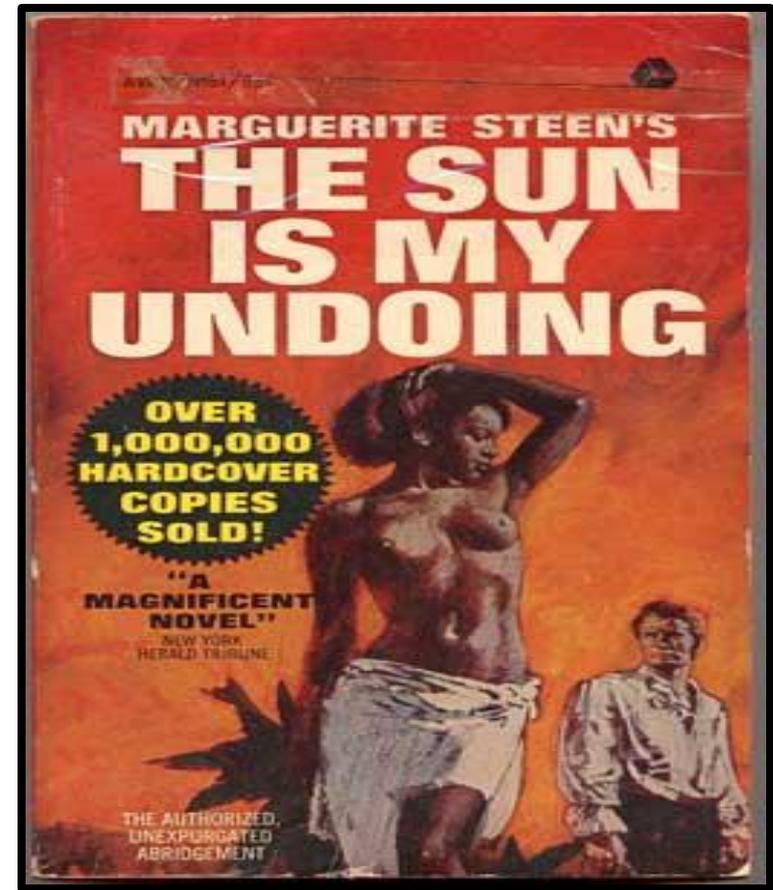
Discussion Questions:

- What is the significance of the multiple references to “kissing?”
- What does Janie mean when she says that her tongue is in her friend’s mouth? What happens to Pheoby at the end of the novel after she has listened to Janie tell her story, in other words, what does she decide to do?

Mammy



Jezebel



Re-reading the novel's title

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk.

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day.

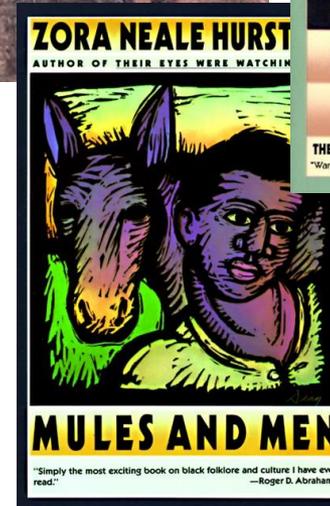
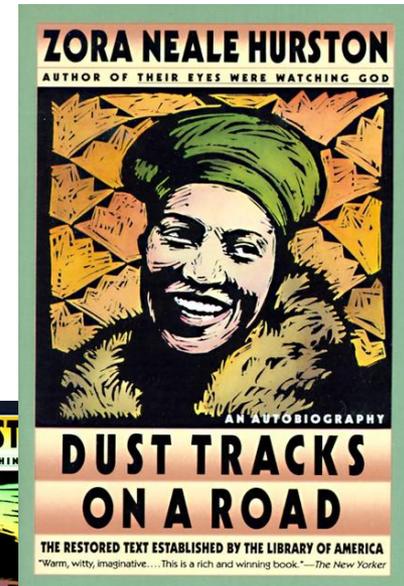
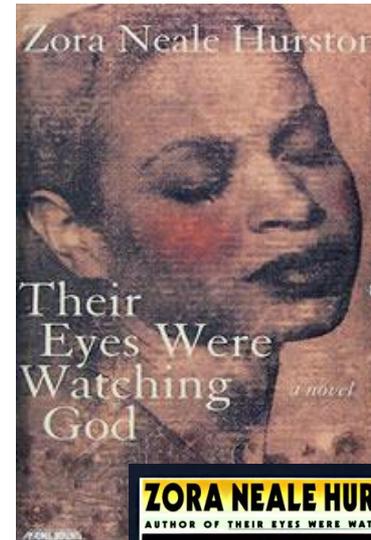
(Chapter 1, Page 1-2)

Discussion Questions:

- If we read Janie as Erzulie, how does the opening dramatic action of the novel help us re-interpret the meaning of the novel's title?

Zora Neale Hurston: “A Genius of the South”

Hurston published seven acclaimed books during her lifetime, four novels, two collections of field research, and her autobiography. She published dozens of short stories, several plays, wrote scores of essays.



Final Slide

Thank you